



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of the Presentation of Christ at the Temple

Commonly called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Being Sunday, Epiphany IV, February 2nd, 2014

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Jesus' original apostles might charitably be described as anything but top draw. Some were horny-handed sons of toil, fishermen like Peter, Philip and Andrew. Two of them – Judas Iscariot and Simon Zelotes – were former terrorists. Matthew had been tax collector, an extortionist and a traitor to his people. In fact, there seem to have been only two intellectuals in the bunch: James and John, neither of whom entirely typical of the breed. Moreover, they were hotheads with such frightful tempers Jesus nicknamed them “The Sons of Thunder.”

The strikingly small representation from Judea's intellectual elite among Jesus' followers should not be altogether surprising. Intellectuals have a long established reputation for being the very last to catch on to the truth. After all, it wasn't an intellectual who recognized the emperor was naked in the Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. It was a little boy – the absolute opposite of an intellectual.

Today's college and university campuses provide similarly graphic examples. Consider: The very last people to catch on to the fact that Marxism has been an utter and abject failure as a political, economic and social system are largely to be found in Washington think tanks and on the campuses of American colleges and universities.

Indeed, one of the most extraordinary things about the Three Wise Men is that they were able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah despite the fact that they were intellectuals. Of course, it helped that they were astronomers on a quest to prove an astronomical theory. And it probably also helped that they were foreigners. If they had been Judeans, they might well have reacted in the same way as learned men in the Temple at Jerusalem when they met Jesus a dozen or so years later..

And consider the implications that incident for a moment: An 11 or 12-year-old boy spends two days running intellectual rings around the brainiest theologians in Jerusalem, and not one of them thinks to say: “Give the kid a scholarship to the best Yeshiva in town.”

Instead, they write him off as a know-all who is making them all look silly, and breath a collective sigh of relief when his parents turn up to cart him back to the boondocks.

The obtuseness of so many intellectuals helps us understand why so many of the folks who welcomed birth of the Messiah into the world tended to be relatively poor and uneducated. There is no special merit in being uneducated and underpaid. It is simply that the mind of the Ordinary Joe is relatively uncluttered with

preconceived opinions that prevent him from perceiving the obvious.

In today's reading from St. Luke's Gospel we encounter two people whose sheer ordinariness enabled them to do something quite extraordinary: They were able to recognize the infant son of an unremarkable couple from Galilee as the Saviour of the World. And all this without the surprise appearance of remarkably bright stars or the prompting of angel choirs!

One was an 84-year-old widow called Anna; the other a man named Simeon. Luke (who, like all good physicians, is acutely observant) tells us Anna never left the Temple precincts, but stayed there serving God night and day with prayer and fasting. She was a prophetess, Luke writes, adding that she was the daughter of a man called Phanuel of the tribe of Aser, and had been widowed for at least 60 years. Anna must have been a truly memorable character because Luke, writing what must have been at least three or four decades after her death, was able to glean a remarkably detailed picture of her.

His description of Simeon, by contrast, is rather sketchier. Luke tells us that the Holy Ghost had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen at first hand God's Messiah. We can deduce Simeon must have been quite elderly from the song he was inspired to compose when he took the infant Jesus in his arms and blessed him.

Simeon's song has become one of the Church's best-loved canticles. It begins: "O Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation . . ." And it is commonly known by its opening words in Latin "*Nunc dimittis.*"

Luke doesn't explain to us how these two people were able to recognize the infant Jesus as the

Consolation of Israel. Certainly it wasn't by following fashionable contemporary assumptions. A vast majority of Jews, from intellectuals to the low brows, were firmly convinced the Messiah would be a warrior king in the mold of King David. Clearly the Holy Ghost played a major role in the revelation.

But the Holy Ghost does not work totally insolation. Simeon and Anna were plainly receptive to the insights he bestowed. And their receptiveness was by no means accidental. It came about as a consequence of the cultivation of a "childlike faith." As Jesus tells us: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

The word childlike should not be confused with childish. A childlike faith, first and foremost, requires us to recognize our place in the universe *vis a vis* God. And that, for many folks with a high regard for their own intellects, is a highly distasteful exercise. An acquaintance once asked why a well-known columnist was such a vehement atheist. "He just can't envisage anybody being more intelligent than himself," was the reply.

A good place to begin the cultivation of a childlike faith is at the bottom of Page 595 of the Prayer Book. It is the collect entitled *For Quiet Confidence*. Let me read it to you:

O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength; By the might of thy spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and