

**01 February 2026 Epiphany 4**

**Rev Wayne Toleafoa**

**Luke 2: 22-40**

**RECOGNIZING CHRIST**

One of the reasons why I like using the Revised Common Lectionary, is that the gospel readings basically follow the chronological order of Jesus' life.

This week the lectionary offers us two sets of Bible readings - the first is about Jesus' public ministry. The second set of readings includes the gospel story of Jesus' presentation at the Temple. I have chosen the second option today simply because it's more chronological.

When we're studying anyone's life we like to start at the beginning -- know where they were born. Who were their parents? What were the significant steps or chapters in their lives. What peculiar happenings shaped their lives.

In a couple of weeks' time, we will be launching a memoir written by one of our members, Kevin Rose. The launch will be conducted by Rev Warren Fortune and an address will be given by Rev Ken Smith. Some of us have read extracts from Kevin's book already, which reflect a particular time and the life and values that shaped Kevin's character.

Last year we launched another memoir by Hugh Thornton, telling of his life and times. Another great story about the experiences and people who shaped Hugh's life.

What a great project to be doing in your senior years. I can be assured of one thing in the case of both these men. A star did not come up in the East at the times of their birth (or mine). But there were special events that happened around their births. You'll have to read the memoirs to find out.

Today, we stick with the chronological order of events in Jesus' life to reveal Jesus' story. And we stay with the theme, 'Jesus- Light of the world'.

If we think of Christ's birth as the coming of the Light described in John's gospel, we can think of Epiphany as the season of 'ever increasing light' as Jesus goes from being the tiny baby in Bethlehem, to coming out of his Nazareth obscurity, to his public baptism at the River Jordan, to the wilderness temptations, to finally emerge full of the power of the holy Spirit in a very public ministry. A public ministry that would eventually lead to him to the cross.

But before all that, Luke tells us that forty days after his birth, Jesus was presented at the Temple and that Jesus' presentation at the Temple was also Mary's ritual purification after childbirth, which was required by Jewish law in Leviticus 2.

Joseph produced two sacrificial pigeons to be offered up for a first-born son which was also Mary's thank-you offering. The two pigeons indicate that Mary and Joseph were certainly not wealthy people. They were giving the minimum gift required for a thank offering.

By contrast, Mathew's gospel doesn't even mention the presentation at the temple. Mathew's version of Jesus' birth gives us the impression that everything happened quickly. There was danger all around. The wicked King Herod creating a pressure-filled, dangerous environment for Jesus and his parents.

Immediately after Jesus' birth, the Holy Family became refugees, forced to flee to Egypt. They do not return until at least a decade later, to live in the small village of Nazareth. Jesus is presented at the Temple once again at aged 12.

Some Bible commentators suggest that we can reconcile the two accounts. It is entirely possible that Jesus' presentation 40 days after his birth, happened before the arrival of the magi - who tradition has it, arrived months after Jesus' birth.

I think the main point of today's gospel lesson from Luke, is that Jesus - the Messiah and the Light of the world - was recognized by Simeon the priest and the by the prophetess Anna.

There were crowds of people at the Temple going about their business that day, but only two people recognized Jesus as messiah. From Luke's gospel we heard the well-known liturgical passage known as Nunc Dimittis. ('Nunc' translated 'now'; 'Dimittis' meaning 'release' or 'dismiss').

The Nunc Dimittis is often used at Christmas or Easter at the end of the service - as part of the Benediction/ Final blessing. It is uttered as a kind of 'relief' after a long wait...The long wait of Simeon and Anna.

"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to the gentiles and for your glory to Israel. "

Recognizing Christ is not always an easy thing to do , especially in an age when there are Christians who claim to know Christ better than others. I've shared that joke with you

before about the woman that said 'There are only two true Christians in our church, me and the minister. And I'm not so sure about the minister!'

The real question is, 'Who's beliefs represent the voice of the Holy Spirit? 'Or the mind of Christ?

How do we know our own beliefs are in sync with the Holy Spirit?

Just this week the Waitemata District Police Commander Naila Hassan refused permission to self-styled Bishop Brian Tamaki and his Destiny church to walk and ride their motor bikes over the Auckland harbour Bridge in protest. Tamaki has stated that he and his church intend to ignore the Police Commander because they believe God gives them the right to cross the Harbour Bridge.

The Police Commander is a woman, with an Arab sounding name which of course creates great theatre for Christian Brian on his Harley Davis charger. We hear echoes of the crusades: Arab vs Christian, Evil Arab Woman vs Christian Knight on his Harley Davidson charger ... fighting for the right!

To be fair, Destiny Church did some great work during Cyclone Gabrielle helping with meals and other assistance. They have done some great work with their 'Man Up' programmes - turning around the lives of men at war with themselves and everyone else. But they have also been very intimidating towards gay people, foreigners and non-Christians.

When we look at their aggressive behaviour, are we looking at the work of the Holy Spirit? Can we imagine Christ riding or walking with Brian Tamaki - intimidating gay people and non-Christians and refusing to obey the law? How do we know that what Brian Tamaki is doing is not the work of the Holy Spirit?

I think the answer to those questions lies in one word that was so central to Jesus' beliefs and so central to all Jesus own behaviour. That one word is of course, 'LOVE'.

Where do we see the image of Christ in human behaviour? We see the image of Christ wherever we see LOVE in action. The word 'Christ' and the word 'love' are almost synonymous. Jesus' central belief was of course: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself'.

The first Letter of John written as late as 100 years AD, represents the maturing Christian doctrine in the early church, where God is already described as 'Love'.

*<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Anyone who does not love, does not know God, because God is love. | John 4: 7-8.*

You are not doing Christ's work if you are not showing love towards your neighbour. You will recognize Christ wherever you see acts of love and its corollary justice.

When it comes to deciding if something is the voice of the Spirit, we need to ask: 'What is the most loving thing to do?' in any given situation. The most loving thing may be the hardest thing to do but that is what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus every day.

Taking up that cross and doing the loving thing, will transform the society around you and of course transform your own life. We have seen that happen in countless Christian lives where they have done the loving thing and changed the world for the better.