

Hymns: 152: "This is the day that the Lord has made"
532: "Born in a stable"
90: "Sweet is the work, my God, my King"
358: "Let earth and heaven agree"

Readings: Isaiah 40: 27 – 31
Luke 2: 25 – 35

WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE?

This week, I've avoided the straightforward lectionary readings in favour of a festival rarely recognized in Methodism. This special day, called Candlemas, fell a few days ago. It marks the event we heard about in the passage from St Luke's gospel where Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus into the temple forty days after his birth. It's tricky to go back to his birth in February when our "normal" readings have already shown us his Baptism and the calling of his disciples. But we miss something vital if we pass over the story of the old man Simeon, sitting there in the temple, waiting for the fulfilment of his dreams. So we're going to put the normal course of events on pause while we take a look at this incident. Next week, we'll be back on track.

So much for the subject of the day. More needs to be said about the dynamics of this service. This has been a week to end all weeks in the life of Wesley's Chapel. Let me list the concatenation (or should I say "cataract") of events that have been flung at us since last we met:

- Thursday: the headmaster of the Leys school in Cambridge, together with a goodly number of former pupils of the school (including a dozen of our own former Wesley scholars), were present to acknowledge the anniversary of the death of the school's first headmaster, the Rev'd Dr William Fiddian Moulton. You can see the flowers laid alongside his statue.
- Friday: the wedding of Alex Mack and Rachel Barber – a truly delightful event with all the guests in evening dress. The wedding took place in the early evening and everyone was going out for a posh dinner afterwards. A lovely sight and a beautiful service.
- Still Friday evening: with the wedding group gone, we received a large congregation which gathered to pay its respects to Rosina Frimpong

Manso, one of our long-time members. It was a service full of pathos – sadness mingled with gratitude and hope.

- Saturday: we spent the morning attending a traditional Ghanaian betrothal ceremony. The young man, Harrison Dike, was from a Nigerian family and Alice, our Alice, from one of our faithful Ghanaian families. It was full of happiness and joy – ancient rites were enacted that bound two families together and set the happy couple on their way.

You must imagine the poor preacher with his head full of the story of the story from Luke's gospel and, swirling around it, all these experiences of life and death, memory and hope, past and present. There's no way the preacher could get away from the co-mingling of themes, this pot-pourri of events. For in this morning's service we have just baptised a little baby, Poppy Joy Roake (daughter of Simon and Sally who were married here six years ago); and we will soon bless the wedding of Harrison and Alice; and, to cap it all, we will say prayers with those mourning the death not of Rosina Frimpong Manso but of Sam Asante – the family will be taking Sam home to Ghana for interment later this week. So the service is charged with all the notes we've lived through over these last days and, somehow, we must hold everything fast in an exposition of the scripture and a declaration of the meaning of the gospel for our daily lives.

I'm going to do it by reverting to a role I'm just beginning to learn about. I'm just reading the screenplay for a film I'm getting involved with. So I'm going to present my thoughts in the manner of a series of "Acts" and "scenes," pictures which (at least that's the hope) will move our thinking through the necessary stages. So, with all that in mind, let's go.

Act One.

Scene i. Picture an old man ruminating on the past. His life is all but over. His deepest hopes have failed. He knows that he hasn't long to go. He asks himself some fundamental questions:

- Where have all the flowers gone?
- Has my life been worth living?
- What's it all been about?

In this frame of mind, dejection on his face, a child is brought to him. He takes the child in his arms.

Act One.

Scene ii. Still with the old man.

The moment the child is given over to him, he knows. Oh yes, he knows all right.

- *This* is what he's lived for.
- *This* is what it's all about.
- *This* is where the future lies.
- *This* is the fulfilment of all his dreams.

The lights come on – in his eyes, in his speech. He is utterly transformed.

- *Now* I'm ready to go, he says;
- *Now* I understand everything;
- *Now* lettest thou thy servant depart in peace;

For mine eyes have seen what I need to see, what I've longed to see; my heart now understands what I've yearned to understand. Hope has rescued me from what was beginning to feel like despair.

Act One
Scene iii.

Move forward to the present day.

Think of all the funerals we've done at the Chapel since the beginning of this year – Ron Frost, Sam Asante, Ada Brady and Rosina Frimpong Manso.

- Where have all the flowers gone?
- What was life all about for them?

As I looked across the pews during their funeral services, I could see the answer (or at least an answer) to those questions. The meaning and purpose of their lives could best be seen in their offspring, all of whom had once been babies whom they held in their arms. Just holding those children must, at least momentarily, focused the minds of those now gone to glory on a clear reason for being alive.

And today's baptism reinforces that message. Recently, millions of people went to the Tower of London to see the ocean of poppies that had been placed there, 888,246 to be exact, - all in commemoration of those who'd lost their lives in the First World War.

[I place one ceramic poppy on the pulpit for all to see]

And here is one of those poppies. Margaret bought it to remember her own great uncle who'd died in that war. But I put it

here today to acknowledge the Poppy, (Poppy Joy Roake) whom we've baptised today.

Holding a tiny, helpless child in our arms tells us more about the meaning of life, the values of life, than all that money can buy.

Now as well as then; for Simon (the father of Poppy) as much as for Simeon (the old man in the temple).

Act Two

Scene i. [Flash back.]

The old man in the temple knows that the hope he's now filled with isn't just for him. Things have gone well beyond the personal and the particular. His words say it all:

"Mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people."

Henry James defined *great* literature as that which takes the particular and raises it to the level of the general. God's *greatness* lies in the fact that he took something that happened to a little and insignificant family living long ago and turned it into an event of universal significance.

Act Two

Scene ii. [In the present again]

Flowers have been laid in the font for today's baptism. And flowers have been placed at the headmaster's service last Thursday. And flowers abounded for the weddings we have celebrated this week. But they'll all fade. The scripture reminds us again and again that all flesh is grass that we, like the flowers in the field, will one day fade and die. And so we will.

But as I watched the young men and women, our Wesley scholars, accompany the headmaster as he placed those flowers; as I saw the uniting of families (not just a bride and groom) at those wedding ceremonies; as I meditated on the compound interest of a good education, so I recognized the wider ramifications of the

particular acts we were celebrating. The deepest things we can know are never those that pertain to us as individuals but to the way we are integrated in some greater network of people. As an old African proverb puts it: we only become fully persons through the persons we encounter along life's way.

Act Three

Scene i. [Flash back.]

The old man's words take this momentum still further. Much further. This child is to broaden his parents' lives considerably. But there's more to expect. Listen to the old man's next words:

"[he shall be] a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel."

The mathematics of the Bible are simple: Jews + Gentiles = everybody, the whole inhabited earth. This event was intended to unite the whole human race.

Alas, as we all know only too well, it has been taken over, bought out, snapped up by groups, confessions, churches, fanatics, who've made it serve their own partisan, sectarian, divisive, exclusive agendas. No one "owns" the Christ event. It's bigger than all of us. It was intended to transcend, subsume, unite, hold together our fragmented humanity. We human beings were never supposed to quarrel over it like dogs over a bone.

And the most fundamental division, hinted at in the passage, has been occasioned by race and culture, the gulf that has opened up between Jews and Christians. But the story of our divisions doesn't end there.

Act Three

Scene ii. Margaret and I saw *Selma*, a great film that shows the famous marches that took place fifty years ago, part of the attempt to gain voting rights for Black Americans in the still segregated Deep South. My mind was filled with memories of my own visit to Selma exactly ten years ago. In the company of American senators and

congressmen, and a number of people who'd taken part in the original march, we led thousands of people over the infamous Edmund Pettus bridge. Arm in arm at the head of an enormous procession were the likes of Harry Belafonte, Andy Young, Linda Bird Johnson, Joan Baez. I myself walked between Fred Shuttlesworth and John Lewis. Shuttlesworth had known beatings, imprisonment, attempts on his life and that of his wife and children. Lewis was the man who led the first of the three marches (Martin Luther King was preaching in his Atlanta pulpit that day). And it was Lewis who had received a heavy blow to the head from a club swung by one of the State police force who caused such mayhem that day. To be that close to such heroic people was deeply moving.

The hatred shown that day, when clubs and whips, tear gas and dogs, mounted police and a savage crowd of white people, were unloosed on those marching in a peaceful demonstration, was a hatred shown by Christian believers who had somehow found a way of bringing the person of Christ into their own way of thinking. It was the Jesus who'd been acknowledged by Simeon as the light to lighten the gentiles who had been robbed of his power to soften the human heart, transform sectarian human behaviour. It was, in a word, odious.

Act Three

Scene iii. [Flash back.]

So we have sensed the joy of the old man in the temple; we've witnessed his feeling of the fulfilment of this dream. But there's a final word. It's uttered to Mary. And it goes against the grain of everything we've considered thus far.

"Behold this child is set for the fall and rising again of many.... Yes, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also before the thoughts of people's hearts may be revealed."

We're going to have to experience some dark times before we have a chance of raising our thoughts to a higher plane.

[A marble cross, fashioned from a quarry in Sylacauga, Alabama and which was given to the Chapel in 1954 is now placed on the pulpit.]

It was on his cross that Jesus revealed the true nature of his love – unfathomable, immeasurable, unconditional, freely available, unconquerable, yours, mine for the asking. The cross through which “sorrow and love” flow mingled down. Here was the pain promised to Mary. Here we see the heart-piercing sword. But, far from revealing despair and loss, this cross has become the very symbol of hope and victory.

This particular cross, of course, came from a place and a time when the gospel was still being preached by opposing sides of a segregated State, - by one side to express the dream of a truly inclusive society and by the other to justify the view that some people are not (and can never be) the equal of others.

*Act Three
Scene iv.*

The film *Selma* ends with a portrayal of the arrival of the by now enormous demonstration, headed by Dr King, into Montgomery, the capital of the State of Alabama. They had overcome. A new voting law was on its way. They had not resorted to violence. And the dream of Simeon:

“Mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,”

was echoed in the words of the battle hymn of the republic so scintillatingly uttered by Martin Luther King,

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

For Simeon, for Martin Luther King, for the parents of Poppy and the families of those we’ve married here in the last few days, for the Wesley scholars with so much to live for and those mourning the death of loved ones, the message is the same. His truth goes marching on. And our response, shown in our lives as well as on our lips, can only be “Glory, glory, hallelujah!” Amen.

