

St Mary's Dorchester, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2025 i.e. Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

Malachi 3:1-5  
Hebrews 2:14-end  
Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What makes us trust someone?

Part of good communication is getting your message across in a way that other people will receive. You have to show your audience that your message is rational, that it makes good sense. You have to show that your emotional reactions to things are similar to your audience's reactions – that you can relate to how they feel. And you also have to build a rapport with your audience – they need to know that you're the sort of person they can trust. Those three things – rationality [*logos*], emotional relatability [*pathos*], and trust [*ethos*] – are the three pillars of persuasion. They are what is known as the “rhetorical triangle”.

It's good for us to notice when someone is appealing to those three things. We're bombarded with messages from people all the time attempting to persuade us. Sometimes they are trying to persuade us to do and to believe things which they think are in our best interests. They may know what's in our best interests or they may be mistaken. And then there are those people who want to persuade us, and who don't care about our interests at all. In any case, spotting the tools of persuasion at work helps us to know where we stand.

I'm not just telling you this for fun, although I am enjoying myself. I am of course trying to persuade you that I am someone worth listening to - “If you listen to me you'll learn more about rhetoric”. I try to be a trustworthy speaker, but everyone gets stuff wrong and I'm no exception. For the record I treat a sermon as the beginning of a conversation, so I don't see it as a failure if I get corrected – it's just the conversation carrying on. What that means is if I ever say something here that you find surprising or that you think is incorrect please challenge me on it. I was very gratified when a few people did that back in December. You know who you are: you may not realise that you made my day.

This year we'll be getting a lot of our Gospel readings from the Gospel of Luke. You may notice as we read through the Gospel that Luke is very keen to establish his own credentials. Compare that

with Mark: we don't know who Mark really was, and he clearly doesn't care that we don't know. Compare it with Matthew, who doesn't talk about himself, but who reveals enough of his character through his choices: his preferences and his prejudices. And compare it to John, who says a few things directly about himself, but only very late in his Gospel. Luke on the other hand begins by telling his audience exactly why he thinks they should trust him. He says that his intention is to compile an “orderly account” based on the testimony of eyewitnesses [1:1-4].

“You start as you mean to go on.” And Luke does indeed go on in the same way. We see plenty of examples of Luke's concern for credentials in our Gospel reading today. Simeon and Anna only appear for eleven verses and three verses respectively in the whole Gospel. Even with such a brief exposure I reckon they still end up being some of the best-loved characters in the New Testament – perhaps in all of Christian Scripture. Luke lavishes such attention on them it's easy to miss that neither of them held any formal religious office. Or perhaps that's the point: these are people who don't need a title because their actions speak for themselves – they are so obviously in love with God. The actions of Mary and Joseph show that they too are without fault in the eyes of both people and God. This is a story about trustworthy people doing exactly what they ought to do.

And within this protective bubble of trust and trustworthiness God appears. The Holy Spirit has a more obvious agency in Luke's Gospel than any of the other Gospels. Up to this point the Spirit has been mentioned or been active in the story four times, [1:15; 1:35; 1:41; 1:67]. The statement that a person is “filled with the Holy Spirit” has already become a signal that Luke wants us to trust that person's insight and their character. In the way the Spirit has corrected people [e.g. Zechariah], and encouraged them, and empowered them, God has revealed himself to be trustworthy. Even in these first two chapters, Luke has already primed us to expect the Holy Spirit to do wonderful things; and that expectation will not be disappointed.

The reason for telling this story at all is, of course, because of what it says about the main character. Jesus' birth is at first proclaimed by angels. His identity is confirmed by these beautiful people in the Temple in our reading today. And as we go on to hear about his about his behaviour as a teenager, and his growth, and the beginning of his public ministry, we will have in the back of our minds the support and the endorsement of all of these trustworthy people, and the Spirit working behind the scenes. Even before he has said a word we know that Jesus is a person worth listening to.

This message is reinforced by our other New Testament reading, from the letter to the Hebrews. Here the emphasis is not so much on Jesus' trustworthiness as his reliability. The unique features of

Jesus' life – the fact that he is both human and divine – mean that he is better placed than anyone else both to meet our human need and to intercede for us to the Father.

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters [– that's you and me –] in every respect... Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. [Hebrews 2:17-18]

This hints at what we call the doctrine of the Incarnation. Jesus' Incarnation enables us to appeal to him as the perfect mediator between God and humanity: a person whose support we can count on, simply by virtue of who he is.

\*

I'd like to close with a final word about trustworthiness, and the trustworthiness of the church in particular.

A difficulty in trusting people and institutions is not a problem unique to us, in the West in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. But I think we do have a claim to be the least trusting culture that has ever existed. If I'm honest, I think that parts of that lack of trust are morally culpable – there are things we can do and should do to be more trusting. I would say that resisting cynicism on the one hand, and sharply questioning anyone people who sells dreams of easy liberty on the other, are both clear aspects of the Christian vocation in the West today – both would help us grow in trust. However, other parts of that systemic lack of trust are not our fault. In many cases people and institutions have shown that we are right not to put our unconditional trust in them.

The Church of England is going through a particularly difficult season right now. In the last few months, to say nothing of the last couple of decades, we have learned things about the institution of our church that strongly undermine its claim to be trustworthy. To my mind it isn't the individual sadists and spiritual abusers that do the most damage to our trust; it's the way that the structures of power and prestige in the church array themselves to defend and promote one of their own, even when they know something is wrong. That to me is the deeper abuse of trust: the application of authority to ignore and minimise legitimate enquiry.

All of this should be material for prayer, and lament in particular. My hope is that we are approaching a time when the church's success will be measured differently. I hope that in a new way

the institution of the Church of England will find its pattern in one who became vulnerable. This one chose to enter a culture of cynicism and self-indulgence – a culture not so different from our own. And he placed his trust entirely in the people who had no authority or prestige; and the only condition that he ever placed on that trust was that one of them say “yes”. Human beings rewarded his trust with iron and wood and vinegar; but he never stopped being faithful to us.

I pray that a properly humbled Church might use this opportunity to willingly and gratefully grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ, who himself is our trust and our healing and our unity.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.