

Reflection for Epiphany 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

From time to time on television there are reality documentaries in which you see a chief executive or company director discard the boardroom, their large office with its shiny desk and personal assistant, to spend a week or two on the shop floor. Here they are seeing, feeling and experiencing what it is like at the coal face - the sharp end of their company, meeting customers face to face, hearing their real views not those filtered through layers of management, experiencing the conditions, the working practices, the frustrations of those at the opposite end of the organisation. They usually end such programs returning to their jobs at the top of the organisation with new ideas and understanding.

During this last week, slipping by almost unnoticed, has been Candlemas or, to give it its full title, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple - a festival which marks the end of the Christmas Season (*Forty days have been and gone since we gathered to celebrate the birth of our Lord*). This marked the end of the period where, in Jewish law and custom, a woman was considered unclean following childbirth. If the child was a boy, eight days after birth the child was circumcised after which the mother was unclean for a further 33 days. At the end of that period the mother offered a sacrifice of either a lamb or, if she was poor, two doves or young pigeons. In addition, if the child was her first son it would be "presented" to the Lord.

From the perspective of the liturgical year, it is about looking back, reminding ourselves once again what lies at the heart of the Christmas season - the incarnation of Christ - God with us in and through his son.

So what is the connection between the two – the top manager working on the shop floor and the incarnation of Christ?

Placed side-by-side they help us to understand the incarnation in deeper and more meaningful way.

Firstly, in both cases, something has been given up by coming down to grass roots level. For the manager it is the office and backroom staff; for Christ it is his place in heaven. In both cases they want to come alongside ordinary people. But that is where the comparison breaks down. For the manager it is only a few short days; for Christ it was a lifetime. For the manager it was simply about finding out; for Christ it was about coming alongside so that, ultimately, he could give everything including his own life to bring us salvation.

When we talk about incarnational theology we are talking about God, in Christ, coming to us, choosing to walk with us, feeling what we feel, and understanding the problems of day-to-day life. That says so much; it means that as we come to God in prayer, as maybe we cry out of pain and suffering or offer thanks and praise in a time of joy, he understands because he has been there.

The manager who never steps onto the shop floor cannot be expected to understand the problems, the frustrations of their work force. The same cannot be said of God because he **has** been there and has given more than we could ever give.

Secondly, incarnational theology also provides us with a model against which to live our lives and a model for the working of the church. It is a model that calls us to stand alongside and to walk with those we are seeking to minister to. It is not about going in, doing something and walking away; it is about constant commitment and love, it is about being there, making a real difference. Or, as

our gospel reading this morning reminds us *"You are the salt of the earth"*. Salt is no good stuck in a jar on the shelf, it needs to be added to food to enrich the flavour. If we do not immerse ourselves in the community, we are looking to witness to, we are like the salt just sitting in the jar.

When I was training for ordination, I remember being taken onto an estate in Nottingham that had a very bad reputation. One of the most noticeable things was that the only body or organisation with a permanent 24hr presence on the estate was the church. Other bodies and agencies came and went, doing valuable work, but only the church stayed. That is an incarnational understanding of ministry, one the church must not forget or abandon.

Thirdly, when comparing the two images I began with, in both cases at the end of the period walking alongside those at grass roots level, both returned, but with a changed outlook, seeing what now needed to be done. For the manager, the week at the coal face resulted in them taking new ideas, new ways of looking at things back to the boardroom, from which change may well have followed.

For Christ having completed his work of salvation, through his death and resurrection he ascended back to heaven as, Hebrews puts it. *"For we have a great High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God—Jesus, the Son of God. Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin."*

The High Priest's role is to intercede on behalf of the people before God. The wonderful thing about our high priest is that, because of his incarnation, he fully understands both our strengths and weakness. What that means, as Hebrews reminds us, is that we can approach with confidence, the God of grace knowing we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when we need it. This is Christ's ongoing heavenly work as our great high priest.

Reflect again on the practical implication of this. Firstly, it should encourage us in our prayer life, giving us a new sense of confidence as we offer up to God our prayers, not just in moments of crisis, but constantly. If we are living in an incarnational way, walking alongside those we are seeking to minister to, those we are seeking to share the light of Christ with, we will find ourselves holding those situations before God in prayer.

Secondly, it is reminder to us that we cannot walk alongside somebody without being touched ourselves - touched in a way that will challenge and shape us. Christ learned the pain of sin, and its temptations, even though he never sinned. He learnt what it was to be poor and on the margins in a human sense. That is important for us because ministry is not just a one-way thing. To walk alongside someone who may be suffering greatly, it is amazing how much you may learn and receive yourself, growing as a person. Blessings may come when we least expect them or look for them.

Living in the light of incarnational theology is not just about looking at Jesus and reflecting on his words it is also a call to walk in our Lord's steps, about being the salt of the earth, the light that is visible, remembering, as we do that Jesus has been there before us, and allowing him to work through us.