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The FURROW

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Anne Thurston

Presenting
a Child

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Just before Christmas I was returning from the park with my small granddaughter when I noticed a man coming towards me smiling broadly. I recognised him as a neighbour from one of the nearby roads but it was the warm engaging smile that struck me. Usually we exchange brief greetings and pass on; this time he stopped ‘Do you also have a young visitor from abroad for Christmas?’ he asked, looking down at my companion. I responded telling of our good fortune in having all four grandchildren living close by, but I had noticed the ‘also’ in his question, and asked, ‘What about you? Has your grandchild arrived?’ The smile extended further and he told of how their first grandchild, born in the States, was paying her first visit home. She was six months old. Arrived on *Brexit* day, he told me; we both agreed that her birth was *the* good news of that day.

Having described the pleasure of having her and her new parents with them, he parted saying, ‘We hope to bring her to the church on Christmas day’.

And so it was two days later that they ‘presented’ their child. The family sat at the back: grandparents, parents, aunts and the solemn cherubic child surrounded by love. This is ‘A’ they said holding her up. And they sang carols and listened to a story of a migrant couple who, searching for a place where a child might be born, were offered a temporary shelter in a stable. And they heard how this child was the cause of angels announcing tidings of ‘great joy’. They also listened to a weaving of the dark complexities of that story into the current crises and of the call to bring light and hope. As that new baby was brought to the church and ‘presented’ and was clearly the most important gift for that family; they were also, even without the ritual of baptism, acknowledging a faith community and its stories as part of the grammar and grace of her life.

All of this I want to think about now in the light of that feast of Candlemas where another Child was brought and presented as revelation and light.

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The contrast between new parenthood and new grandparenthood is enormous; in the first you experience the most profound upheaval. Your lives as individuals and as a couple are changed utterly; you are now 'bound' together as parents of this new child who is yours and not yours. From the very first cutting of the cord the mother and then the father will begin to learn the painful art of balance between holding safe and letting go.

For the grandparents the idea that their own child has become this mother, this father, seems as miraculous as the arrival of the baby itself. You have a very different role now: you must step back and simply be there. And from the moment you hold this new life in your arms – flesh of your flesh – your strongest urge is to give thanks and praise, but you also sense that the child is blessing you.

John and Mark dispensed with nativity narratives in their gospels, Matthew gives us the story of Joseph and then the Magi, but how impoverished we would be without Luke's account. Luke allows us to see a pregnant Mary and Elizabeth and gives the two expectant women the opportunity to bless and assure one another in the solidarity of a shared experience. The detail of the 'child leaping in the womb', repeated twice by Luke, is both symbol of joy and a physical, material sign of life: there will be a birth. He gives us the back story to the journey to Bethlehem where they go 'for a taxi' according to one 4 year old narrator! He includes the details of the wrapping with cloths and so at the end of the gospel when the body is wrapped again we remember those first bands of cloth. He tells of angels and shepherds, of fear and joy. And finally he concludes the infant stories with the presentation in Jerusalem and the blessings of Simeon and Anna.

A most beautiful painting of this scene by Giovanni Bellini hangs in a gallery in Venice. As recently 'created' grandparents, a few years ago, we sat in front of this picture for a long time. The painting hangs on an easel in a small room with just enough space for it and two chairs. In the front of the picture a pale Madonna, with that translucent post birth weariness and wonder in her face, holds the tightly swaddled child towards Simeon. She is reluctant to hand him over and supports herself with one elbow leaning on the ledge. Simeon holds her gaze as firmly as he already holds the feet of the child. To the left, behind Mary, are two women, the older of whom must be Anna, to the right are two young men, one of whom looks out at the viewer with a questioning look. Between Mary and Simeon stands Joseph, closely observing. The half figures fill the whole space, the background is dark and the faces are compelling. You feel the solemnity of the occasion; the child, clad in white, is upright, with its mouth slightly open and gazing out without

fear. Bellini, like Luke, paints a human portrait and in the faces of these figures he conveys the complexities of the emotions of that moment. It calls for a response of stillness and contemplation.

In Luke's telling, Simeon takes the child in his arms and praises God and knows that he may now depart in peace, 'for my eyes have seen your salvation.' Once again the divine drama finds its human reflection: the reality is, that once you become a grandparent (or grand-uncle or aunt) you know that the future is now with these children and, that as you wane, they will flourish. Yet that is not a morbid thought for various reasons: firstly there is the sense of appropriateness about the order of things and there is something precious and privileged about knowing that this time is limited and secondly it is the case that every birth brings a surge of hope. It is important to think of this especially with the grim events of this past year. (In the week following the election of Donald Trump the *Guardian* published a cartoon showing the president-elect with a threatening pointing finger sitting in the branches of a gnarled winter tree with a tattered American flag hanging from one branch. But down on the ground – from where change begins – a very small black girl looks back defiantly while she waters a green seedling.) In a similar way the lighting of the candles does not blot out the darkness, but enables us to see our way and to know that we are not the source of the light. Job in his suffering was reminded of this, 'where were you when the morning stars sang together?'

Luke doesn't report Anna's words but we are not surprised that they too are words of praise and that she does not cease telling everyone about the child. (And if we needed another reminder of the human counterpart to this: then sit next to any newly minted grandparent and the phone will come out and you will be inundated with reports and pictures of this 'the most amazing child that ever was!' Yes, Anna praised and spoke about the child until her words were all used up, taken up and transformed into graces and blessings for the future generations.

I have been reading Anna and Simeon as 'grandparents', bearers of the tradition – tellers of stories – whose role it is to pass on their wisdom, to offer unconditional love, to bless the child and its parents and to let them go in trust and faith.

Now Lord you have kept your word:
 let your servant go in peace.
 With my own eyes I have seen the salvation
 which you have prepared in the presence of all the people.
 A light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and for glory to your people Israel.