

Sermon, Candlemas 2018: Galatians 4:1-7; Luke 2:22-40

This evening I would like us to think for a few moments about *recognition*. In our Gospel reading, Anna and Simeon *recognise* Jesus. They have never seen this infant before, but they recognise something in him. Amazingly, they recognise in him the Lord of History and the fulfilment of their dreams, and the dreams of their people. Their recognition of Jesus, like the recognition of all those who knew him and learnt from him and worked with him, and most importantly recognised him again after his death, is the foundation of our faith. So it's right we sing Simeon's song in this chapel night after night, and that it is said by millions of people around the world every day.

Recognition is something that can take two forms. One is perhaps more common today: I recognise you as someone fitting my model of what you should be like, what success is, or what human life is about. When I go looking for someone to have a relationship with then I am looking for certain things – things I want to recognise in them, things that will persuade me to let down my guard and give them access to my life. When an appointment is made, interviewers have a set of essential and desirable characteristics and the person to be invited is supposed to meet all the essential ones and as many of the desirable ones as possible. The interviewers want to recognise someone who fits the ideal they already have in mind. Success is taken to be reflected by attainment of particular things: nice house, nice car, nice wife, nice children: nice life. Recognition like this is transactional – I go looking for what I want and when I find it, I recognise it for myself.

But there is another form of recognition, and it is inordinately more interesting. I could recognise you as defining for me in a new way what life is about, what my life should be about, what human lives are for. I could have the humility to *learn* from the fact I have met you. This is *really* recognition.

Or, I could recognise that you have the technical or personal skills we didn't realise we needed – but, you're right, we do. You are the person we *really* need to get the job done we need doing.

Or, I could recognise that your version of success, the life you have chosen, has a coherence to it that shakes my understanding of what a good life looks like.

Rather obviously, Simeon and Anna take this second approach, and so does Jesus, of course. Simeon and Anna don't recognise a standard model they knew to look for – they are changed by their recognition of the answer they were looking for in a form they didn't expect. Simeon sees the baby and realises: this is enough, I am satisfied. Again and again Jesus recognises in people the things he needs for his mission, and he and his mission are changed by each such encounter. Again and again people recognise in Jesus what they have been looking for all their lives – and are changed by their recognition of the answer they were looking for in a form they didn't expect.

This is the approach to recognition, the understanding of recognition, that celebrates freedom. And what is recognition about, if not about freedom? My freedom to recognise in you what I have wanted or needed but didn't know it. My freedom to recognise a truth that goes deeper than my own understanding.

As Paul reminds us in the reading we had from the letter to the Galatians, Jesus brings freedom – freedom, he says, from the elemental spirits of the world. These elemental spirits include those voices which tell you what you should recognise as success, or what you should recognise as the answer you have been looking for to the questions you couldn't quite frame. We are, Paul says, no longer slaves but children, and if children then heirs – and we should add, if heirs, then free.

A slave is someone recognised for their capacity to fulfil a task I need completing. A slave is someone who literally belongs to me, and whose purpose is to fulfil my will. If I recognise a slave then I am recognising someone who fits with my idea of what I need.

But a child is totally different. A child is recognised as someone whose existence changes me, and a child is someone whose freedom I want to foster so that they continue to change me. Mary and Joseph give Jesus the freedom to become himself – as parents do. And in turn he, like all children, changes his parents. Every time we meet, we are changed: that is true recognition. Amen.