The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple 2022

I have been reflecting again on one of my favourite poems. I’d like to read it if I may, and then we can chew on it together a little this Candlemas.

This poem by the great English C19th poet Gerard Manley Hopkins is entitled ‘In Honour of St Alphonsus Rodriguez’. St Alphonsus was the door keeper of a small Jesuit Community house on Majorca at the turn of the 17th Century. He was a lay brother, his job was to admit guests, deal with callers, do quite a lot of the day to day admin of the house. His role, though essential, lacked any glamour or prestige. It is remarkable that he is remembered at all, and that we are talking about him now. A little man, in a little room, the wooden door of an out-of-the-way house, on a little Island. But then again, most Saints go unnoticed.
You’ll perhaps already be seeing the connection I’m making with Ss Simeon and Anna today, as they wait unnoticed, and perhaps even the objects of pity or prejudice hanging around the temple courts.

Hopkins writes ‘In Honour of St Alphonsus Rodriguez’:

Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say;
And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield
Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.
On Christ they do and on the martyr may;
But be the war within, the brand we wield
Unseen, the heroic breast not outward-steeled,
Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray.

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
Could crowd career with conquest while there went
Those years and years by of world without event
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

You see where I’m going with this, today, on Candlemass as we fasten our eyes on Ss Simeon and Anna, those unremarkable and perhaps even a little
strange old Temple-hanging crones. Those ‘very religious old people’ that few mind, but that people don’t actually want to become. Simeon and Anna are very far from being aspirational figures in the world today. But perhaps we need to think again.

In the Spain of St Alphonsus’ day, it was all about gallantry. Reputation, honour and noble bearing were all that mattered. In our own time and place, glamour, money and status aren’t errr exactly unknown features of life.

*Honour is flashed off exploit… trumpet now that field,*
*… forge his glorious day.*

*On Christ they do and on the martyr may;*
Even the Church, Hopkins tells us, has its own forms of superficial glory-seeking.

*But (But) be the war within, …Unseen, …*

Hopkins sets before us the startling truth that the doorkeeper who’s life is devoid of glamour or acclaim is actually perhaps truly alive, truly human in some deeper, hidden, more real way?
The God who made ‘mountains’ (Hopkins tells us) and who added the tiniest beautiful ‘veins’ to ‘violets’ (great and small), this God has ‘crowded’ that same so overlook-able life with ‘conquest’? That the real adventure, real life, real growth as a person, the true self, and ultimately the eternal Kingdom we hope for, are all happening somewhere else than out ‘here’ in public display.

Alphonsus is a true Christian hero. Not acclaimed or exalted and yet in the topsy-turvy Kingdom of Jesus he is amongst the richest and greatest. I wonder if he knew?

Simeon and Anna didn’t know. But year after year they waited and prayed, dogged and stubborn in faithfulness and love. And we know, when we are tested by life’s twists and turns, that love, faith and hope are not always nice things. Sometimes we hold on to them with gritted teeth and only by stubbornness.

Because, as the prophet Micah said, it was ‘suddenly’ that the Lord came into His temple, and even then it was a tiny child who would take 30 years before His public ministry. And even now, we wait believing but not having seen the salvation of which Simeon sang.
We also wait, and sing in the Creed ‘He will come again in glory’ to bring all creation home to God. What great lessons Ss Alphonsus, Simeon and Anna can teach us about life.

Talking of old crones who hang around the temple, today we say a very fond farewell to Jamie Rogers. Music is at the heart of worship, it always has been, since the Lord and the 12 sang psalms at the Last Supper, since Simeon sang the Nunc Dimittis, and for centuries before that. Thank you, Jamie, for your gifts of talent and wit and humanity, and for ministering to us in this temple. May God bless you as you go and serve at another corner of Christ’s universal altar, at Canterbury Cathedral.

And thinking of other corners of Christ’s altar with whom we are one Body, the Church. When you go abroad (don’t we long for those days again?!?) and pop into a local church as I hope we all do on a Sunday in Provence or Galicia or wherever it is, and there are the old ladies or crusty old gents praying, as they do day after day. Do you think to yourself, ‘Wow! One day I want to be like them!’ I suspect most of us don’t. But we’re mistaken. They, like Simeon and Anna before, and St Alphonsus Rodriguez, are about the most
important business there is to do in this life. Prayer, and hope, and waiting. Patiently trying (with two steps forward and one step back, as ever) to love, to be formed by Christ.

We don’t know; Simeon and Anna didn’t know; nor did Alphonsus. But they knew that God was with them where they were, and with this simple, stubborn faith, they fulfilled their purpose in life and found glory through the ordinary of where they were.

And here’s the nub for us today, with which I’ll finish: We may be running around after our children’s hectic activity timetable, or waiting for endless medical tests and procedures. We may be trying to make a relationship work, or worrying that our memory and wherewithal is fading quicker than we had hoped it might. We may be falling in love or caring for a loved one, or scared of empty feeling days – whoever we are, and at whatever stage of life: like Simeon and Anna we are called to see that God is there amidst it all, if only we would see. Holy people and holy things are not just other people and other things. Who and where you are in life, like Simeon and Anna and Alphonsus, wherever it may be, God’s door is open there.
Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say;
And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield
Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.
On Christ they do and on the martyr may;
But be the war within, the brand we wield
Unseen, the heroic breast not outward-steeled,
Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray.

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
Could crowd career with conquest while there went
Those years and years by of world without event
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.