

**Stanford Memorial Church
January 1, 2006**

**IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.**

**Psalter: Psalm 148
Gospel: Luke 2.22-40**

For Simeon and Anna it more than a New Year they had been praying for; it was the advent of a new era. It was the fullness of time. They had been praying so faithfully for so many years that they had almost become permanent fixtures in the temple in Jerusalem—and their hope was wearing thin. Still they persevered, as within them dwelt the certainty beyond words that they would experience the presence of God's chosen one. To Simeon it had been "revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah"(Luke 2.26). As for Anna, now an eighty-four year-old widow, time was running out; yet she had remained faithful, praying and fasting for some 50 to 60 years after the death of her husband.

We have all known people like Anna and Simeon who seem to possess a kind of special spiritual quality. They are readily found in all the great religious traditions. It could be Rumi the mystical Muslim poet; or Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu holy man; or the Dalai Llama of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, whose recent visit had such a profound impact on the Stanford community; or Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic monk; or Elton Trueblood the Quaker whose writings have inspired so many. Had they been present with Simeon and Anna in the Jerusalem temple on that occasion they too may have had the sense of something profoundly spiritual breaking into what appeared to be a fairly ordinary religious event.

Then there was Joseph and Mary—once again totally caught off guard. Here they were a young Jewish couple, filled with joy, who had come to Jerusalem to observe the tradition of presenting their firstborn son "to be designated as holy to the Lord"(2.23). A service that calls the mind the Christian sacrament of baptism, which declares the infant to be a child of the community of faith, belonging to God, and entrusted to the parents and godparents and other family members. Along with Mary and Joseph there had to be many other such parents performing a similar ceremony in the great temple of Jerusalem. Over the years Simeon and Anna had seen them come and go, from a few wealthy parents who put on a lavish display, perhaps even sacrificing a large animal such as an oxen or sheep, to the far more numerous peasant couples, like Joseph and Mary, who had to scrimp and save to afford a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

For Joseph and Mary it would be the third time that a significant life experience would be elevated beyond belief and description. First, there had been the conception itself, not exactly the way they would have planned it, since they were not yet married; yet an angel informs Mary that she will bear a special child favored by God. Next came the birth itself. Not only did they have to undertake the arduous journey to Bethlehem,

but once they arrived rooms were impossible to obtain. Ultimately, they had to settle for their child being born in a barn, in the midst of the animals. Their joy over the birth was overwhelmed by the appearance of shepherds from the fields, guided to the stable by angels, gloriously filling the sky, exclaiming the messiah has been born.

Eight days later, Joseph and Mary may have thought life had finally returned to normal when they had Jesus circumcised, according to Jewish practice. Once again they appear to be engaged in seemingly normal ritual, as they followed the tradition of presenting their first-born son to the Lord. Imagine their astonishment when Simeon and Anna, virtually ignoring all the other parents and male babies, make a beeline for them. Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms and exclaims, “Master . . . my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2.29-32). At the very same moment Anna praises God and begins “to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2.38). According to the Gospel of Luke, this is the end of the infant narratives about Jesus.

Like so many stories of the Bible, the account of Joseph and Mary presenting the infant Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem occurs within two timeframes. On the one hand, there is the calendar sense of time, where things take place in a recurring pattern. But then special moments or events have a way of breaking into the ordinary stream of time, and suddenly we have a whole new perspective or ascertain a deeper truth. The Greeks employed two words to describe these two concepts of time. The ongoing, recurring type of time they called *kronos*, from which we get words like chronic—as in a chronic illness—something that is ongoing. The second word, pointing to a deeper significance or meaning, is *chiaros*. As Simeon and Anna devoted years and years to prayers and fasting in the Jerusalem temple they had the almost endless *kronos* experience of parents and firstborn sons coming and going. Their perseverance was ultimately rewarded when Mary and Joseph appeared with the infant Jesus, and they perceived the presence of the promised messiah. They proclaimed the deeper sense of God’s presence manifest in a new and transforming manner.

Today, of course, is New Year’s Day. On the surface, on a chronic level, it happens every 365 days, or 366 on leap years. When we look back to the past year, 2005 was a year ominously ushered in by a horrendous tsunami in Southeast Asia, which, as we were recently informed, resulted in the death of some 200,000 people. Memories of, and comparisons with, that terrible tsunami occurred as King Kong size hurricanes, such as Katrina and Wilma, lashed the southeast coast of our country, decimating cities like New Orleans and Biloxi. According to the annual Associated Press poll, Katrina was the number one news story of the year, followed by the death of Pope John Paul II and then Iraq.

Is there a *chiaros* insight to be derived from Katrina? Fundamentalists who seem at times to relish tragedies as evidence that the coming of the messiah is increasingly imminent, may cite Katrina—an Iraq as well—as evidence that the Lord is on the verge of returning. Or perhaps the true *chiaros* insight in regard to Katrina and related

hurricanes, is that the theory of global warming is no longer just a hypothesis. Indeed the increased violence of the hurricanes is not so much an example of a chronic cycle in nature as it is an instance of what can happen when we—intentionally or unintentionally—alter nature to a significant degree. The new *chiaros* insight appears to be that unless we make significant changes that reverse the global warming trend, the chronic cycles of natural disasters will far surpass what we have seen to date. It is this likelihood of drastic reverberations to come that makes Katrina a symptom of an underlying condition badly in need of attention and repair.

And what of the death of Pope John Paul II, the number 2 story? The outpouring of grief and recognition was truly overwhelming. Literally millions of men and women participated in his death and funeral, whether directly or through the medium of television. His relentless opposition to communism and repression will in all likelihood be judged by historians as one of his most significant achievements. For me, coming from a hospital environment, the *chiaros* insight is the manner in which he orchestrated his death. His decision to die in the papal apartment—and avoid being hospitalized--spared his caregivers the need to insist on the continuation of artificial life support systems, as he had so steadfastly advocated for the parents of Terri Schiavo.

As for the military action in Iraq, assessments continue to reverberate from one extreme to the other. It does appear, however, that the overall popular support for our presence in Iraq eroded in 2005 from what it was in 2004. Regardless of what position one takes, I believe most would agree that the 300 billion dollars expended in Iraq could have incredibly transformed our national education and health systems.

Finally, we cannot say adieu to 2005 without the requisite best and worst lists, whether in reference to cars, cloths, movies, books, videos, music, vacation sites, dogs, cats, or anything else that can be assessed in our day to day existence.

So today we move from 2005 to 2006, and what do we perceive? For one thing, you may be intrigued to know that this will be the year when the first wave of Baby Boomers, born in 1946, turn 60. Not only does this include our current president and his wife, Laura, as well as former president Clinton, but such individuals as: Connie Chung, Reggie Jackson, Diane Keaton, Liza Minelli, Dolly Parton, Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone, Donald Trump—and even Jimmy Buffett. When Gail Sheehy wrote her best-seller *Passages*, she stopped at age 50, as if what lay beyond was unexplored territory. Now she has entered that territory herself, she has defined the years from 50 to 75 as the Age of Mastery and declares that she has “a rebellious purpose—to put out to the world that midlife today is a gift that keeps giving.” Perhaps the *chiaros insight* here is that aging is often less a matter of passing years as it is the sense of vitality and openness to life that comes from within our hearts and souls.

Regardless of what happens in 2006, however, we know that there will be some reoccurring *kronos*-type events taking place. From February 10-26, the Winter Olympics will take occur in Torino, Italy. With the specter of terrorism always hovering about, we will probably be watching with some degree of apprehension.

Iraq will undoubtedly continue to be a big ticket item, and it is quite likely that the national election scheduled for November will essentially be a referendum, the voice of the people assessing our situation in that war-torn country. Some will undoubtedly insist that we must stay the course, a significant number will remain unsure, while others will take to heart Edward R. Murrow's observation that "We cannot defend freedom abroad if we destroy it at home."

For the greater part of 2006, as the days, weeks and months unfold, we will be about our individual interests and pursuits, our families and our work. There will be many signs of God's abundance and blessings: glorious days of sunshine, golden sunsets, a full moon over the bay, the surf crashing endlessly on the beach, and flowers in bloom, in some form or another, the entire year. And may there be many joys, celebrations and special occasions. At the same time, while we always hope for good days, we know there can be bad ones as well, whether through misunderstanding, accident, illness or death. We never know when we will be walking through the valley of dark shadows, as a part of God's creation which we do not like nor understand, but know they are there. While we may not have an understanding of such moments, we do have the assurance of something even more important, and that is the continuing presence of God's tender care and love. As Simeon and Anna discovered, there are the moments—when we are losing hope and life become precarious and uncertain—in which God's presence is experienced most substantially. In that spirit, I would like to conclude with a prayer recently composed by the marvelous writer Maya Angelou:

Father, Mother, God, thank you for your presence during the hard and mean days.
For then we have you to lean upon.
Thank you for your presence during the bright and sunny days, for then we can
share that which we have with those who have less.
And thank you for your presence during the Holy Days, for then we are able to
celebrate you and our families and our friends.
For those who have no voice, we ask you to speak.
For those who feel unworthy, we ask you to pour your love out in waterfalls of
tenderness.
For those who live in pain, we ask you to bathe them in the river of your healing.
For those who are lonely, we ask you to keep them company.
For those who are depressed, we ask you to shower upon them the light of hope.
Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of substance, we ask you to give to all the
world that which we need most—Peace. Amen