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## **The Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2. 22-40)**

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Last year, in this first week after Christmas we read from Matthew's gospel, which depicts the immediate aftermath of Jesus' birth in a significantly darker hue. The wise men, the magi, have (in the text) come and gone – and in the process, alerted King Herod to the birth of one described to him as the newborn king of the Jews. Herod, threatened and enraged, had ordered what the tradition calls 'the massacre of the innocents' – killing 'all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old or under'. Jesus survived only because his parents were warned in a dream to flee to Egypt – the contemporary parallels are painful. Matthew's gospel emphasises the extent to which news of Jesus' birth is heard as an existential threat by the powers that be.

In Luke's account, by contrast, the immediate aftermath of Jesus' birth is depicted as orderly and peaceful. The holy family is not forced to flee to Egypt, but free to celebrate his arrival in the customary way. And though the element of suffering and danger is present – with Simeon warning Mary that 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel' and that 'a sword will pierce [her] own soul too' – overall, the scene is bathed in light. Jesus is presented in the temple in accordance with the law and welcomed by elders as the fulfilment of promise. Theologically, where Matthew draws out Jesus' threat to the old order and emphasises disruption of his birth, Luke emphasises continuity – the ancient pattern of God's redemptive purpose come to the surface, and now realised visibly, tangibly in a human life.

The way this is shown in our text is beautiful. Luke's two key witnesses are wisdom figures, and they seem to represent complementary facets of Israel's life. Simeon dwells in the city, in Jerusalem, a just man on whom the Holy Spirit rests and who – open to a larger form of knowing – has been drawn to the temple at just this

time. Anna dwells in the temple. She's a widow, a woman of prayer who is (quite literally) full of days, as if the years of her life are numbered to culminate in this very moment. She was married for seven years – where seven is the number of perfection and fulfilment. She's now aged 84 (which is seven times 12, where twelve signifies God's kingdom, authority and rule – think 12 apostles, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 gates of heaven). You can't get much readier for revelation than that – and she too is present at the presentation of the child! Neither is an official priest or scribe – but they're unmistakably elders; together they proclaim that, for those with eyes to see, the glory of God is come among God's people.

And it seems to me there's something being suggested here about the depth dimension of the events of Christmas, the deep time to which it's connected. We're used to reflecting on Christmas as the advent of the new – a newborn child, God doing a new thing, a change in the status quo. And this is true. But Luke seems also to be insisting that Christmas is connected to the old – as I said earlier, an ancient pattern come more fully to light, something essential realised again.

We all know it's possible for law and tradition to become instruments of stasis and death. When Luke insists that Jesus is presented in the temple in accordance with 'the law of the Lord', as is 'customary, 'according to tradition' – these are phrases we tend to associate with the kind of rote religious observance that we like to think of Jesus overturning. But yesterday, I feel as though I got a deeper insight into the significance of this aspect of Luke's story.

And that's because Neil and I visited an exhibition of the Australian indigenous artist, Emily Kam Ngawarreye. Emily is one of Australia's foremost artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; she died in 1996 aged very close to Anna's age – 85 or 86. The subject matter of Emily's paintings is overwhelmingly to do with what you might call traditional law and lore. She painted her Country, the plants, animals and dreaming stories to which she was connected and the ceremonies associated with responding to and caring for Country according to tradition. Many of her works represent stories

of ancestors 'whose pioneering travels gave form, shape, and meaning to the land, seas, and skies in a long-ago creative era'. She painted marks traditionally drawn on sand and the body as part of ceremonies ritually re-enacting the stories, songs and dances synonymous with the creation of the world'.<sup>1</sup> Her faithful repetition of these stories and signs express again and again the depth of her kinship with Country and its origins, making visible the ancient patterns that connect life to its meaning.

And here's the thing, the insight I found – there's a fundamental difference between this faithful repetition, this faithfulness to a living tradition and its law, and a static fundamentalism or legalism. Because to repeat faithfully (as opposed to mechanically), you can't just copy the external form; you have to be connected to the underlying truth of things. And once you're connected to that underlying truth or pattern, you can express it in new ways, in different media – in Emily's case in batik, in painting on canvas, in an extraordinary abstract style, using non-traditional colours and experimenting with line. Once you know and indwell the inner logic of things, you are free to express that logic in different ways and to recognise it when it shows up in different forms. As in this close up (see last page) of one of her paintings of ceremonial marks, using different colour than the traditional ochre.

And this, it seems to me, gives an insight into the freshness of Anna and Simeon's perception of Jesus, and the significance of Luke's insistence on the fulfilment of Israel's law. It is *because* these elders were truly steeped in the logic of God's call, responsive with their whole lives to God's promise of creation and redemption as expressed by the law, that they could recognise and respond to its authentic manifestation in new form. Unlike some of the traditionalists, they were free to welcome this presence of God without hesitation and without fear. It's a faithfulness completely distinct from the rigidity of fundamentalism; a wisdom knowing that blesses and is blessed.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunne, Carey (6 September 2016). "[Journeying Beyond Western Time in Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art](#)". *Hyperallergic*. (referenced on Wikipedia).

