

I WANT TO BE

Some years ago Prudential Assurance ran a TV ad in which lots of people said what they wanted to be. There were bikers and businessmen, housewives and grandparents, nurses and teachers, young and old. I remember particularly an old lady who said, 'I want to be in conglomerates.'

'Prudential' means 'wise', and the message of the ad was clear: 'If you want your dreams to come true you'd be wise to insure with the Pru.' And of course this is right; part of wisdom is the proper management of material resources; prudent investment can help your dreams to come true. But there are things that money can't buy, and no prudential policy can assure us that they will be ours. And it's these things, the things beyond price, which we most desire like love, happiness, and peace of mind.

Simeon knew this. He knew where he wanted to be: he wanted to be with God. He knew that without God love, happiness and peace of mind, and all the other treasures beyond price, would never really be his. Simeon's prudential policy, his path of wisdom, was to watch and wait and pray. Like us he must have had to make provision for the practicalities of life, but he also made provision for the things beyond price, for what he really wanted to be. He trusted in God and said his prayers, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him.

That same Holy Spirit had assured him that his desire would be granted; he would see God's chosen one face to face. He knew, as

Malachi and the prophets had said, that God's coming would be unexpected, and so, he took seriously the need to be prepared so that he would know God's moment when it came. And when God's moment did come he was ready. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple as Mary and Joseph came to give thanks for the birth of their firstborn Son, and on seeing the baby, Simeon recognised him as the One who was to come, God's Chosen One.

What does this story mean for us today? We live in very different times to Simeon. Making wise provision for the future is much more about making sure we have adequate insurance or investing in conglomerates, than about saying our prayers just in case we have an unexpected meeting with God. Even so, the prudential question remains: What do I want to be? For what future am I investing; for what future am I insuring myself?

This question presses upon us urgently in this over-insured age where we are threatened as never before by risks against which we cannot insure. Covid stalks the earth, cyber crime threatens our security, national and personal; the financial situation may have improved since the crash, but investment needs a boost, jobs are no longer secure, and over all hangs the reality of climate change, some effects of which are already irreversible. In a world of overwhelming risks we insure ourselves in desperate ways: we build concrete defences against the sea even though we know they will be overcome; we turn against those who are different – immigrants, asylum seekers, those of other cultures and faiths – seeking security in national and racial exclusiveness; we ape celebrity as though fame

and fortune will protect us although it is all too evident that it will not.

These expedients are no more than the ways in which we keep the really deep question at bay: Do I want to be with God? And how do I assure this?

To this question, as to all the really deep questions of life, God's answer is not a proposition, nor a policy, but a person. The story of Simeon helps us to see this. The end of all his searching was not personal security, nor worldly wealth and celebrity, but a meeting with a person who confirmed his faith and who gave him hope. When the child he met became a man, many thousands met him and had the same experience. Jesus turned their lives around, helped them to see where their search for security was false, and invited them to put their trust in him. The way of faith is the way of assurance if we want to be with God.

Simeon's story reminds us that the heart of the Christian faith is an encounter, a personal relationship with Jesus. One of those who learnt this the hard way was St Paul, whose conversion we celebrated a week ago. Writing to the Philippians from his prison in Rome, he dismissed all his learning, his piety, his membership of the chosen race as so much garbage compared with the gain of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. Paul was so changed by his relationship with Jesus that he came to see the world as Jesus saw it, in other words he came to see the world through the eyes of God. And it is that perspective that we need if we want to be with God, and to assure the future of his world. The strength of will that we

need to make the changes in lifestyle and attitude that will assure our future, both personally, nationally and globally, can only come from God. We cannot do it unaided.

At Candlemas we turn from Christmas towards Lent, the time when we seek to come closer to God and to model our lives on Jesus. In an uncertain world it may be good to be in conglomerates, and it's wise to be properly insured, but it's wiser also to say our prayers so that we come to see the world through God's eyes, to live in his strength, and to recognise him when he comes. At Candlemas God meets us on our journey, as he met Simeon; he shows us his Son and asks, 'Where do you want to be?'