



**The Presentation in the Temple by Giovanni Bellini c. 1462.**  
Tempera on panel, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.

The Feast of the Presentation of Christ at the Temple in Jerusalem provides us today with insight into the darker side of religion. For despite protestations to be about peace and joy, we all know from both history and from our contemporary experiences, that religions involve division, in-fighting, anger, accusations of infidelity to the truth, and these lead us on to violence, wars and punishments which have at times been cruel, inhuman and degrading.

### **Luke chapter 2**

33 And the child's father and mother

were amazed at what was being said about him.

34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary,

'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel,  
and to be a sign that will be opposed

35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed –  
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

It is a prophecy which was to be fulfilled in every century of the Christian era, including our own.

But, what is it in religion that brings the worst out of people? It is baffling, isn't it?

How can people who believe in a God of love burn each other alive? How could they condemn someone to such a death and then stand around and watch it happen? It defies any explanation. Even if they believed that the other person was wrong in their particular interpretation of religion, how could people burn someone at the stake and regard this as a godly activity?

Every time I go to Oxford, I go to Broad Street and stand at the spot when Bishops Latimer and Ridley and later Archbishop Cranmer were burnt at the stake in 1555 and 1556. I feel sick at the cruelty involved and all in the name of religion.

The same pattern may be seen in other religious traditions where there have been violent disagreements.

Reflecting on this has led me to the conclusion that it is in fact not the fault of religions as such. The faulty component visible in all this sad story is in fact the human element. After all, religions have been devised and elaborated by humans. Religions are an expression of humanity rather than something revealed and sent down from on high as our forebears once believed. Religions have provided humans with an arena in which to express their character and personality. Religions draw into them people with needs. Sometimes, these needs may only be met by humans rising to positions of power and wielding it over others. Sometimes the power is absolute and includes the power of life and death.

Those today who dismiss religions often point out that religion is a human construct and not revealed. I believe that to be correct, but it hardly helps their cause because it reveals the true cause of misery and violence in our world not as religions but as human beings. We are desperately inadequate. We find it impossible to live together in peace for very long. We react with irrational violence to provocations. We are failures in the things that really matter. Oh, yes we are good at technology and good at creating works of art. We are good at inventing things and exploring the world.

But when it comes to the things that really matter we are hopeless. You would think that by now, the 21st century, that the whole issue of poverty and hunger in our world could have been improved if not completely solved, but the situation is deteriorating. After all our experiences you would think that we might have learned the lesson that war and violence are not the answers to disagreement, but all around us, people are prepared for nuclear and other forms of warfare.

At the end of the day, humanity needs help and this is what I believe religions can offer because as well as bringing horrible humans into positions of power, they have also been inspired by some of the best of humanity in every part of the world. In our own religion, we can see the tensions between love and hate, concord and discord, interdependence and selfishness. The story of Christianity is that humanity needs help. That is what the Christmas message is all about, isn't it?

"He came down to earth from heaven"

"The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight"

"Thou camest here from heaven's domain / To bring men comfort in their pain"

"Come thou long expected Jesus / born to set they people free"

"Hark a herald voice is calling / Christ is nigh it seems to say.  
Cast away the works of darkness / O ye children of the day"

Our task today is to reject the negative and promote the positive in our faith and, sitting lightly to divisive dogmas, follow the spirit rather than the letter of our faith.