

Candlemas

Sunday January 29th 2017

Luke 2:22-40

Today we celebrate Candlemas, one of the Church's most ancient festivals. The feast day is actually February 2nd, a significant date because it falls exactly forty days after Christmas Day. It marks the end of the season of Christmas and Epiphany, which is why the crib has now been put away for another year, and the decorations are stored. For Mary and Joseph, as devout Jews it meant so much more. The presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple, which Candlemas commemorates, was motivated by a specific requirement of Mosaic Law. Leviticus 12 talks about the strict purification rules after childbirth, and it was these to which Mary and Joseph were adhering.

When a woman gave birth to a son she was considered impure for forty days. At the end of that time, she was required to bring an offering to the temple, which the priest would sacrifice, thus effecting her purification. So Mary and Joseph travelled the five miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in order to purify her so that they could settle down to family life. They brought with them two turtle doves for the sacrifice which traditionally was the offering of those who were poor, and this little detail tells us much of the status of the earthly family into which Jesus was born. They were short of money, keen to do the right thing, humble and outwardly they seemed very ordinary.

However, the other reason for their visiting the temple on that day was a little more unusual. It had been traditional to dedicate a first-born child but it was not required by Jewish law. This dedication was established as a principle in Exodus 13:

“The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.”

(Exodus 13, 1-2 NRSV)

This was done, with all first born animals being killed as a sacrifice of gratitude to the Lord. The first born human beings were set apart to serve God throughout their lives but the tribe of the Levites ceremonially took the place

of the first-born son and became seen as dedicated, set apart and holy. The firstborn son was still seen to hold an important role in God's eyes, holy and destined to serve him in a special way, but they no longer needed legally or ceremonially to be presented in the temple.

We are actually given very few stories about Jesus' childhood in the Gospels, so when Mary and Joseph chose to do this and offer their first born son for dedication in the temple, this moment is loaded with significance. It is a very important symbol for the parents beginning to recognise that their child is extraordinary. This ceremony, if nothing else, sets the stage for Jesus to live his life, fully committed and dedicated to his heavenly Father. It can also be seen as an echo of the Old Testament account of Hannah's gratitude to God, when her precious, long awaited son Samuel is dedicated in the temple, and his life given in service to the Lord.

But as we continue to read Luke's account of Jesus' presentation in the temple, it becomes clear that although the act itself is important, the people whom they meet that day, and the narrative of their encounters is far more significant.

Simeon and Anna have much in common. Both were elderly, righteous and devout Jews who spent their time in the temple, praying, worshipping and waiting for God to reveal his plan for salvation. Both were patient, humble and open to God's word. It must have been incredible for Mary and Joseph, holding their six week old baby in the busyness of the temple, conducting their temple business to meet with both Simeon and Anna, and be faced with their faith, and challenged by their recognition of their child.

Simeon had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah, and we are told that the Holy Spirit rested on him. Pre-Pentecost this is a different manifestation of the Holy Spirit to the one who fills each of us. This is a special outpouring, allowing Simeon to recognize the Christ and Luke makes it clear that he is in the temple because he has been guided by the Spirit to be there.

He takes Jesus in his arms and praises God, knowing that he can now die because God has revealed the truth to him. He doesn't see a tiny baby, helpless and innocent, instead he sees the entirety of God's plan to save all his

people, Jew and Gentile alike. His words are so important and his insight so clear that the Church of England uses them every day in the daily office during Compline.

We can only imagine how overwhelming this meeting would have been for Mary and Joseph, as Simeon continues to prophecy about Jesus' mission on earth. He tells them that their child will be

“destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel”

and in the first reference in this Gospel to Christ's suffering and death, he says to Mary:

“and a sword will pierce your own soul too”

Simeon, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, knows that Jesus will raise up all those who believe in him, but will be a stumbling block for all those who disbelieve, and that opposition and division will mark his ministry. He tells his mother that she will not remain unscathed. What is to come will be glorious and light-bringing, world-changing but also so painful and divisive too.

These words would have been so hard to hear, and this NRSV translation says that his mother and father were:

“amazed at what was being said about him”

And Luke tells us that they don't even have time to digest this information, or talk about it because at that moment they are greeted by Anna, who is described as a prophetess descended from one of the great tribes of Israel. She sees the child with his family and

“began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem”

She is so sure that this child is the Messiah that she is willing to tell everyone who wants to hear and her devotion, her fasting, her constant and persistent worship and prayer have brought her to this moment. There is an echo here too of the story of Samuel. Both Hannah and Anna have the same meaning to their name, which is Gracious and both women praise God in the temple for his grace in sending a child who will change the world.

I think there is real joy in this story. Their amazing faith, simple yet all-consuming in their lives meant that both Simeon and Anna were able to really see what countless millions of people still haven't - that the Saviour they had encountered was a very different one from the Messiah that most were expecting. He had not come as a political leader to overthrow the Roman occupation and free them in an obvious way from an oppressive regime. Instead he had come as a vulnerable baby, and his life, his example, his mission and ministry, his suffering and death, and his resurrection was going to redeem all of God's people on the earth. Simeon and Anna were able to recognise this, and take comfort in Jesus' presence in the world, and in the knowledge that nothing was ever going to be the same again.

And I think their story is celebrated in such a way today and every year, because their faithfulness should inspire us too.

Traditionally, as part of the Candlemas feast, priests would bless beeswax candles and send them out with the people as a sign to remind them to share the light of Christ.

The lit candle can be a very effective symbol of the Christ-light we carry with us when we believe in him, and maybe today, we should be thinking about how we sustain and grow this light within us.

Simeon and Anna had dedicated their lives to prayerful watching and waiting for the Saviour, so that when he came, they knew him immediately and it strikes me that this relationship between prayer and worship and recognising the presence of Christ with us is so important for all of us. It seems a simple idea but one which is pretty hard to live by, day to day.

If I think about my week, do I honestly allow myself the time and space I need to nurture my relationship with Christ, recognising his presence in every area of my life?

That's a difficult question, and one which has a different answer every day, because every day my faith journey is different. Sometimes, Christ is at the centre and sometimes I am, and I imagine, on some level that's true for all of us. In the words of St Augustine, I know that on the days when "I let go and let God" then my life feels more ordered and Christ feels closer but that can't

always be the reality for us. If we desire to recognise him, then he promises that he will reveal his love to us in many ways. We just have to try as best we can to keep that candle flame alight, and be thankful that each day is a new start.

And I think Candlemas reminds us too to be thankful that there are still Simeons and Annas in this world. There are people who inspire us with their faith, in a world which can feel unsettled and uncertain, wise and humble Christians who lead prayerful and spiritual lives who can be wonderful examples to us. As I stand here, I can think of people in this congregation and elsewhere who have strengthened me by their faith, I encourage you to do the same. Candlemas reminds us to be grateful for them, and to pray for them too.

Our Gospel reading today ends with these words

“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him”

Let's continue to pray for ourselves and for each other that our light grows and becomes strong and that we recognise Christ's presence with us always.

Amen