

Candlemas

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey, on Sunday 30 January 2022

Readings: Malachi 3 vv 1-5 and Luke 2 vv 22-40

'Candlemas' or 'the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary' is a celebration of one of Jesus' major life events; that's what makes it a principal feast. The day falls in the calendar on 2 February, but we usually celebrate the feast on the nearest Sunday, because of its importance. It is the last of the stories of Jesus' infancy.

The name 'Candlemas' is a reminder that this was the day when candles were blessed. But far more importantly, Candlemas marks the end of the Christmas season, the 40 days of our focus on the Incarnation, mirroring the 40 days of Lent and the 40 days of Eastertide, as well as the flood in the Old Testament and the time of Jesus' temptation at the beginning of his ministry. Forty is the number used in Christian tradition to designate important time periods.

The law of Moses required that Mary, with the infant Jesus, should participate in a rite of purification 40 days after childbirth. So Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing along with them a pair of turtledoves to offer as a sacrifice.

What happens at the Temple is remarkable. Two prophets encounter Jesus and understand there is something special about him.

First, there's Simeon. Simeon, we are told, was righteous and devout. And he had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. We can imagine his plight. The older he got, the more he likely asked, 'Is *this* the one?' of every person he encountered. 'Is today the day?' And the answer must have been 'No, not today', a thousand times over. Simeon's patience is remarkable. It's hard to imagine the sense of joy on this day, when all the waiting was over

Simeon takes the infant Jesus into his arms and sings:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared
before the face of all people;
to be a light to lighten the Gentiles
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

It is, of course, a text well known to Anglicans as one of the two canticles at Evensong, with many beautiful settings by composers, used day by day in cathedrals and choral foundations.

It is a statement of faith in the infant Jesus and what his significance will be in the years to come. It is, in this sense, a prophecy, a glimpse into the future. Simeon is saying, 'Today I have seen, in this child, my salvation, my Lord, my Saviour.'

We can understand that Mary and Joseph were amazed. Jesus was not yet 6 weeks old. They had survived encounters with angels, shepherds praising God, wise ones from the east

bearing gifts, and dreams that caused them to escape into Egypt (although it's not easy to align the different chronologies in Matthew's and Luke's gospels).

And yet they must have wondered. In spite of what they had experienced already in Jesus' short life, and in the messages they had each received from angels before Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph must have wondered about what Simeon was saying. 'Does he really mean *our* child?'

And then there's another prophet, Anna. We are told she had lived 84 years – no easy feat in first-century Palestine, especially for a woman. Her devotion to God was remarkable. She prayed and fasted in the Temple night and day.

But on this day, she noticed that something was different. She finds Mary and Joseph, and the baby, and begins to tell everybody who would listen about him. 'Praise be to God,' she may have said, 'for this truly *is* the redeemer of the world.'

On this day, the Temple is a place of meeting. We have a story about waiting, a story about realisation, and a story about discovery.

- Waiting for the day to come, for the Saviour to appear, for all things to be put right.
- Realisation that the day *has* come, that *this* child is destined for the falling and rising of many.
- The discovery that God has revealed all this to us: this light that give light to all the world, this child who redeems all people, who is Christ the Lord.

Like the prophet Simeon, in this generation we yearn for the coming of the Messiah, for all the ills in the world to be put right, for the words of Jesus we heard last Sunday to be our experience: for the hungry to be fed, for prisoners to be set free, for the sick to be healed.

Like the prophet Anna, we hope that our prayer and faithfulness will be fulfilled: that equality will come for all God's people, that peace will prevail over the whole earth, that justice will conquer all oppression.

In the Old Testament reading, Malachi speaks about the coming of the Lord's messenger. This contrasts with the much more gentle, even domestic, scene in the Temple in the gospel reading. But, in spite of his unassuming appearance, the child is indeed the messenger of God and more than that – his Son. This is the one who will refine all of us like fire and fullers soap in the proper time.

Like Simeon and Anna, we believe because we have discovered the truth of who Jesus is, and his importance for us as much as for those amongst whom he lived in Palestine.

At the end of this season of Christmas, the words of Howard Thurman, a twentieth century American theologian, are significant:

After the prophets have spoken,
when the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flock,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,

to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among people,
to make music in the heart.'

Let us work, pray and give to make it so.