

## Presentation of Christ in the Temple [Candlemas]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 2 February 2020

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

This is time of the year is one when I suppose most of us are impatient, looking forward to longer days, to sunshine and warmth – and not least this year after such a dark and damp winter. Well, thank God for Candlemas then. It lies halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, so it marks the day upon which winter is half over and we are moving towards brighter and better days. Walking around the parishes of St Andrew and Castel yesterday, the daffodils and the primroses were sure signs of spring.

There's an old weather rhyme that may encourage us (or not):

If Candlemas day be fair and bright,  
winter will have another flight.  
If Candlemas day be shower and rain,  
winter is gone and will not come again.

And there's an old Guernsey saying,

*Si tu vois le soleil le jour de la Chandeleur, sauve le foin, car tu en auras besoin.*

If you see the sun on Candlemas Day, save your hay for you will want it.

Well, today is Candlemas day. The forecast is for mist, strong winds and significant likelihood of rain (6 mm overnight, apparently), with the coming week promising colder temperatures and sunshine. We'll see whether the proverbs are accurate.

Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is more than a meteorological curiosity. It's one of those hinge festivals, marking the end of one part of the church year and tipping us very deliberately into the next. It's the end of the Advent / Christmas / Epiphany sequence. We can't stay there any longer. The manger scene that has been here since just before Christmas will come down this week. Ascension Day has a similar feel, at the end of Eastertide.

Candlemas is the ancient name for this day, which neatly sidesteps the question: whose feast is this? The Book of Common Prayer calls it 'the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, commonly called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. In the eastern Christian tradition, it is called 'the feast of meeting'.

This is very much a Lucan festival. St Luke is the only evangelist who records it, conflating the 'purification' of Mary after childbirth (something necessary for every mother in the tradition of the time – hence the reference to the two turtle doves or pigeons) and the 'presentation' (more accurately, the redemption) of the firstborn son. And with Joseph in attendance, it is almost as if we are witnesses to a family liturgy.

Luke was writing mainly for a Gentile community away from Palestine, which was little bothered with the niceties and detail of Jewish tradition. So the bigger picture is more important than the detail. And the story which Luke writes is indeed complex. Luke describes purification and presentation. There is both a meeting with Simeon and Anna and an encounter between Jesus and us; we learn more about Jesus and his significance for us. Simeon is content: what he has been waiting for all his life, 'the consolation of Israel', has been realised. But at the same time, he speaks of a tragic future: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

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

Here in the Temple, waiting with their hope undimmed, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, we find Simeon and Anna. They are typical of people whom Luke wants us to meet, with his emphasis on the poor and the other forgotten elements of society. Simeon and Anna are, for me, two of the most remarkable and attractive people in the whole of the New Testament. They are the ultimate role models of growing old gracefully – literally, full of grace.

In spite of everything that could have led them to give up, to abandon hope, they were there, waiting and hoping. Unexpectedly (because they did not know when the moment would be), there before them was Jesus. And their life was complete. They saw with their own eyes God incarnate, God taking on all the limitations of human existence simply because of his overwhelming love for us, his love for broken, fractious, foolish humanity. It was true then. In spite of all the reasons why God should have abandoned us, his overwhelming love for us is a reality now.

We can look to the response of Simeon and Anna as our guide for following in Christ's path. Their hope was undimmed. As we let the light of Jesus shine in and through us, we have the opportunity to pause and wait for those God given gifts of wonder and faith and confidence and thanksgiving.

Candles have been used in the liturgy for this day for well over a thousand years. The candles to be used during the year were blessed and set aside for use in the church. And the festival of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple was ideal for this purpose, with the reference in the Nunc Dimittis, the song of Simeon, to Jesus as the bringer of light.

The late Bishop Kenneth Stevenson, formerly Bishop of Portsmouth, concludes a reflection on this feast with an extract from a sermon by Mark Frank, from the seventeenth century<sup>1</sup>. Mark Frank reflects on the candles, writing these words:

'Take them, and take [Jesus]; the candle of faith will there show you him, and the candle of charity will light him down into your arms, that you may embrace him. We embrace where we love, we take into our arms whom we love.'

Embracing Jesus, we will light the small candles at the end of this service as we move to the font, whilst the choir sings the Nunc Dimittis, and turn our eyes from the long season of focus on the incarnation towards the way of the cross and Easter.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Stevenson, *All the Company of Heaven*, p 32 (Canterbury Press, 1998)