

2024-01-28 ... 10am Candlemas Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Malachi 3: 1 – 5; Hebrews 2: 14 – 18; Luke 2: 22 - 40

Light and darkness have been important themes over the last few weeks and they continue to figure in our thoughts and our personal, and global experiences at present. Today in many ways is a festival of light, but where you have light you will also have darkness.

There are a number of named celebrations in the Church calendar which may be linked to today. It is the 4th and last Sunday of Epiphany; it is also the day where we recall the Presentation of the Infant Christ in the Temple at Jerusalem. In more Catholic traditions it is also known as the Festival of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. On our service booklets however we have the simpler title “Candlemas.” The presentation of Jesus in the Temple would have been 40 days after his birth, because by tradition the purification of the mother of a son was 40 days after that birth, in this case 40 days after Christmas. In the past, the lighting of candles which celebrated both the purification of the mother and the presentation of the child reminded Christians that the light of Christ was immediately recognised by the those of the old order (Simeon and Anna) who welcomed the arrival of the new order. Whichever title we wish to use for today, the themes are strongly bound together and there is an interplay between darkness and light in which the candles play an important part.

Throughout Advent we anticipated the coming of the light and lit those weekly candles; at Christmas we hear of the light revealed to the shepherds the coming of the Magi through the darkness is enabled by a bright star and Epiphany therefore brings a time for continuing revelation, and enlightenment. At the end of Epiphany comes Candlemas. Strictly speaking, the actual date of Candlemas is always the 2nd of February, but churches celebrate it on the nearest Sunday to that date. It is a festival of light which draws together the images of the light of Christ’s incarnation.

The actual date, 2nd Feb, is a watershed time in the natural year it lies half- way between the winter solstice and the Spring equinox. It marks for those with an optimistic outlook, the day when winter is half over. Here today we might need to wait a little longer to reach 2nd February, but the sense of darkness receding, and light increasing is with us already and the festival reminds us of our hope in the light of Christ.

Candlemas almost certainly had its roots in older pagan festivals which followed and celebrated the return of the sun, but it has been a Christian festival for at least 1500 years. Candlemas has been a festival of light, and the day on which, by tradition, people brought their year’s supply of candles to church to be blessed and trimmed. When the only light people had was from a candle they were invaluable assets for homes. Some churches provided the poorer parishioners with a bundle of candles and the blessing of your domestic candles in Church was an opportunity to give thanks for God’s protection and to ask for his light to continue to guide and protect the family. There were thus, practical as well as spiritual origins for this festival of light.

Candlemas is also a watershed in the Church year. The light of Christ has emerged to show us the path which will draw us all to salvation, but the presence of this light inevitably allows the shadow of the cross to emerge as well. Though we have seen our paths lit through Christmas and the Sundays of Epiphany, now we leave them behind and it will soon be Lent. Candlemas marks the point at which we take a last look back at Christmas and then turn our minds firmly towards the Easter cross. For this reason today has also sometimes been called “Bitter-sweet Sunday.”

In our Gospel reading today we remember the sweetness as the faithful older generation recognised, in Jesus, the one who brings in the new life. We have a juxtaposition of the baby Jesus and the two elderly people It is an encounter between the darker world without Christ, in

which they had waited patiently and faithfully and the world with a new light, a new beginning in Christ, between the fading age of the Old Covenant and the new era of the Church of all nations.

Luke's Gospel account tells us that the truth of Jesus the Messiah was confirmed by two elderly prophets, quite how old they were we don't know, but they had served in the temple for a long time. They were not leaders, they were not young or powerful, but God has chosen them to reveal the Messiah, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Simeon and Anna, spoke of the infant brought to the Temple as the long-expected saviour. Faithful to the Law of Moses and to the Old Covenant Mary and Joseph did their religious duty and observed the religious rituals of childbirth cleansing and presentation and in that traditional context they encounter these two people who have waited faithfully for this promised revelation from God.

Anna is an elderly woman probably a constant and faithful figure, but as a woman always be in the background of the temple. Anna sees the child and is inspired immediately to eulogise God and in doing so she affirms the divinity of this child to his parents. Confirming once again what they have experienced. She also announces his arrival in words and movements of praise and thanksgiving, a public declaration for all who there to see and hear. This is a real moment of revelation for those who wish to accept it. Anna is not important in the eyes of the world in which she lives, but she is chosen by God to proclaim the Christ Child.

Luke gives us also the marvellous words of Simeon to whom it had been revealed ***"that he (Simeon) would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord."*** Prompted by the Spirit Simeon came into the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took the child into his arms and blessed God; and spoke the beautiful words which we know as the **Nunc Dimittis Luke 2:29**.

***'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;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.'***

Simeon's faith had kept him patiently awaiting the revelation of God for many years. Now as he sees Jesus he says that God is setting him free just as a slave is granted liberty. He himself is now free to die with God's grace, and Israel is free of bondage. God has saved Israel, as he promised to "all peoples". Luke's account shows us however that the light of salvation is for Gentiles as well as for Israel. Luke is careful to point out that Jesus was a Jew who had his roots in the Old Testament, but clearly in this passage we are reminded by Luke that with Jesus there is more than just a following of the old order of law. The old could pass away because the new had come and the future for us **all** would be safe in Jesus' hands.

But this is as I said, "Bitter-sweet Sunday" and Simeon finishes with some disturbing words. This marvellous salvation through Jesus has a dark side. Not everyone will take kindly to Jesus, there will be a falling as well as a lifting up of many in Israel. Jesus will be a sign that will be spoken against, he will cause a crisis in Israel. Mary the mother of Jesus will go through the same crisis, everyone must decide what to do with Jesus. Simeon says that Mary's heart will be pierced by the grief of loss, by the darkness and the fading of the light and she will need despite all the anguish to remain faithful to God's promise. A bitter pill for a new mother to swallow.

So as we see the candles around us now, let's remember the faithfulness of Mary; and the presentation of the light of Christ in the Temple by Mary and Joseph, and its reception by Simeon and Anna. Perhaps too we may wish to remind ourselves of the grace of God each time we light a candle at home, whether later today or in the weeks to come. At this mid-point of winter we **can** look with hope and expectation to the coming of Spring, above all however, we can give thanks that the Son of God, born in the flesh at Christmas is willing to guide us by his light through the darkness towards Easter, for our salvation. Amen.