

Candlemas 2019

The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple celebrates an early episode in the life of Jesus.

The event is described in the Gospel of Luke, 2:22-40. According to the gospel, Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after his birth to complete Mary's ritual purification after childbirth, and to perform the redemption of the firstborn, in obedience to the Law of Moses, Leviticus 12, Exodus 13:12-15. Luke explicitly says that Joseph and Mary take the option provided for poor people, those who could not afford a lamb, sacrificing a "pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons". Leviticus 12:1-4 indicates that this event should take place forty days after the birth of a male child, and that is why the Church celebrates the Presentation in the Temple forty days after Christmas.

As they brought Jesus into the temple, they encountered Simeon. The Gospel records that Simeon had been promised that "He should not see death before he had seen the Lord" Luke 2:26. Simeon prayed the prayer that would become known as the Nunc Dimittis, which prophesied the redemption of the world by Jesus:

"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", Luke 2:29-32.

Simeon then prophesied to Mary, "Behold, this child is set for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which is spoken against. Yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed", Luke 2:34-35.

The Elderly Prophetess Anna, was also in the Temple, and offered prayers and praise to God for Jesus, and spoke to everyone there about Jesus and his role in the redemption of Israel, Luke 2:36-38.

As we consider the feast of the Presentation, we remember that our parents presented us at church for our baptism. We were dedicated to God, and given our name. We received a lit candle from the paschal candle, at which the priest said,

God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has given us a place with the saints in light. You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life.

Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God, the Father.

The feast of the Presentation officially closes the celebration of Christmas. For this reason, Pope John Paul II began the custom of keeping the Nativity scene in St. Peter's square until 2 February, as we do here. Candlemas is a signpost looking back to Christmas and forward to Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

Today marks a particular event as we celebrate the first Sunday as a parish in our own right. I received the following e mail earlier this week from Wendy Harris, the Diocesan Appointments Secretary.

"I have confirmed with the Church Commissioners that where a priest-in-charge or other minister is named in a pastoral scheme as being the first incumbent of the new parish, this is the authority by which you are appointed and not the Patronage (Benefices) Measure which is the usual way when there is a vacancy. The relevant bit of the measure is as follows:

Designation, selection and admission of certain incumbents

4.9 However a new benefice is formed, the scheme may provide for the designation or selection, usually by the Bishop, of the first incumbent. The provisions of the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 for the filling of vacant benefices will then not apply to that appointment. The person concerned will be deemed to have been admitted to the new benefice.

and will not have to be instituted by the bishop unless he or she directs otherwise."

So, this morning I stand before you as Rector of Stoke D'Abernon. It has been an interesting experience and I am very pleased that it is now settled.

And so, we are left with a slight dilemma. Remember the old saying about Candlemas?

'If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter shall have another flight'. This means that if today's weather is good, we shall have more cold and wintry weather before the Spring.

But what does this Feast mean for us today?

Since it is exactly forty days since Christmas, it is time for us to think about the last forty days and ask ourselves some questions:

In what condition do we present our souls to Christ?

What sacrifices have we made in the last forty days?

Have we said our prayers? Have we set a Christian example to our neighbours?

Have we thanked God for all that we have received?

What has changed in our way of life since the Birth of Christ forty days ago?

What progress has been made?

Whatever our answers to these questions, on this, the Feast of the presentation of Christ in the Temple, one thing is certain. We need to do something about it and there is no better time than between now and Lent.

As we are reminded by Malachi

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

So today we enter into a new Covenant with God just as Mary and Joseph did when they presented Jesus in the Temple. We are called to be messengers as Malachi reminds

Simeon then goes on to warn Mary that her child;

“is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed”,

and that *“a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”*

As Angus Ritchie, writing in this week’s Church Times, put it:

“The Word of God, as it comes both in scripture and in Jesus Christ, pierces our souls and reveals the thoughts of our hearts.

Jesus does not come into the world to judge us. As the Lord comes in humility to his Temple, the judgement is rather that “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3.19)

From infancy to cross, in word and in sacrament, Jesus meets us in humility because he seeks our friendship, not merely our obedience. Are we willing to accept this invitation to be filled and refined by his light and love? Like a sword, this question cuts to the heart of each and every life”.

Lots of questions, I am afraid, and no ready answers.

So, on this the first Sunday in our new era as a newly re-founded parish, I would ask you to take home in your hearts the words of both Simeon and Mary;

First, the words of Simeon, better known to us as the Nunc Dimmitis,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.

And finally, the joyful utterance of Mary, in the words of the Magnificat;

*My soul doth magnify the Lord, **

and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

Simeon was looking backwards- his ambition had been fulfilled. Mary was looking forward and her vision lay before her. At Candlemas 2019, as we look back on Christmas and forward to Lent. We are reminded that we should be like candles bringing light to dispel darkness. We are reminded that Christ is the light of the world as we think about the candle given at Baptism.

As we look back on our years in the United Benefice with our friends in St Andrew's, Cobham could I suggest we consider both but concentrate our thoughts on the words of Mary, our dedication, which are words of hope for the future rather than the words of Simeon, which are a realisation of the past.

Amen.