

Candlemas 2010

The following sermon was given by our guest preacher and celebrant,

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There was a bit of research published recently that established what most of us already reckoned we knew; optimists are more likely to be healthier, be more content and settled in themselves than pessimists. Whether you regard yourself by nature and/or upbringing as a half-full or half-empty person, it's easy to pass this off as an unnecessary bit of pseudo-academic nonsense and move onto something else more interesting. Candlemas asks us to stop a moment and consider what our instincts are telling us. There's a spiritual dimension to how we look at the world and those around us, not merely psychological or cultural. We may have seen it in those French teams of rescuers in Haiti who refused to give up hope when others had done so, and went on to find people buried but still, amazingly, alive.

Candlemas marks the end of Luke's birth narratives. It's quite a complex story, beginning with Zechariah's vision in the temple and the promise of an unexpected son, the one to be John the Baptist. He moves onto an angel appearing to Mary in Nazareth bearing news of another unexpected pregnancy: followed by a meeting of the two female cousins at which Mary articulates what we have come to call the Magnificat. Then comes the story of John the Baptist's birth, when Zechariah declaims the Benedictus. Only *then* do we arrive at the census and Jesus' birth in

Bethlehem, attended by angels and shepherds. The final chapter is circumcision and naming after eight days, as a prelude to this visit to the temple in Jerusalem we have just heard. It is, of course, a whole, a coherent entity. Luke wants us to understand the rhythm of the long tale he has to tell about Jesus' life, death and resurrection in relation to the mission to the Gentiles – the spread of the gospel he describes in Acts – *and* Israel's great covenant past. No wonder it all feels a bit dense, if not actually confusing. But the rhythm is one of hope, of expectation of good, despite human capacity to drift away from God. The covenant of blessing known by Noah and Abraham and Moses – confirmed by the prophets, despite the many hard things they had to say at the same time – is brought to fruition in this child brought to the temple to fulfil the rituals of the torah, the law. The Magnificat was about the imminent overturning of the old order of might-is-right; "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly: he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away". The Benedictus proclaims that, "By the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death". It's all of a piece with last week's gospel when Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, releasing captives and recovery of sight to the blind; and says that this is no future truth but a present one. *Now* is God's blessing. *Now* is it true that God is for us, not against us, despite our lack of constancy and of will. *Now* we can look up with hope rather than cast our eyes down with anxiety. Simeon and Anna see who this child is. Luke asks us to do the same. And if we *do* see, we are drawn into the dynamics of the expectation of good. "A light to lighten the Gentiles"; yes, even us.

One of the social losses of the last generation has been disregard for established rituals that have allowed us to celebrate special events. My mother at 94 bemoans the fact that only one out of her nine great-grandchildren have been baptised. The Book of Common Prayer was precisely about how we celebrate a common life before God through the ordinary movements of life. The churching of women may be unusable now because it's so dated in format: but the idea of giving thanks for a safe delivery of both child and mother, a dedication of the miracle of being a life-bearer and the responsibilities it brings, is life-enhancing. The ritual at the temple, recognising the gift of a first-born and reintegration into society with a changed role, permits a necessary reassessment. Something profound has changed in the order of existence. Human life is diminished when we have no effective way of taking this on board both personally and socially. There's a question put to us who have rightly treasured these rituals; how do we assist people who have dropped out of religious customs to mark life-changing events in a manner that's not just about 'having a party'? Rituals as we have known and celebrated them contribute to the offering of ordinary life by underscoring the reality that *everything* is gift, *everything* a mystery beyond our capacity to grasp fully, *everything* to be approached with a sense of wonder. In our own *very* ordinary way, we are invited to be God-bearers, like Mary; to recognize, along with Simeon and Anna, the immensity of what lies in front of us. Someone, something altogether *bouleversant*, overwhelming.

It's difficult not to describe this as optimism, the expectation of good. But the story also contains a realistic warning. This child will be a source of stumbling and a sword will go through Mary's heart. It isn't pessimism, an *expectation* of

things going wrong, of being ill-fated, but it points us to the fact that there's a valley of the shadow of death to be faced by all who commit themselves to the good. Neither Magnificat nor Benedictus are won without cost. That, too, is part of life-rituals; there's no such thing as love without pain. Blessing lies in running through the inevitable stitches, getting through the sense that it's no longer possible; "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me but nevertheless..", as Jesus prays in Gethsemane. Blessing isn't costless. But prayer, ritual, does enable us to reorientate ourselves, whatever our nature and nurture, towards the God-given reality of blessing and that blessing will embrace sorrow and difficulty. This may not be what is commonly thought of as optimism, though it seems problematic to make much of a distinction. The story of creation in Genesis provides a foundation for this sense of hope and trust with its own rhythm of, "And God saw that it was good". God saw that it was good.

Benedict 16 has rather surprisingly, at a celebration of the conversion of S Paul in the church dedicated to that great missionary apostle in Rome, just a few days ago, made a pitch for all Christians having a common witness. He recalled that 2010 is the centenary of the Edinburgh Conference, which marked the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, when there was an unmistakable insistence that there could be no credible proclamation of the gospel by a divided church. We should take steps that lead to full communion, Benedict said. There are things we can address with common confidence; the fatherhood of God, the victory of Christ over sin and death through his cross and resurrection, and confidence in the transforming action of the Spirit. Given the sense of marginalisation that Christians have been feeling around the world, a struggle

with spiritual values being at a discount, an experience of denigration, even mockery, confidence would seem to be an essential ingredient in how we live and how we speak about what we hold dear. It's true for us in our day as believers that there's no such thing as faith without cost. It would be extremely naïve to imagine that we are the first to think this way. The presentation of Jesus in the temple explicitly reckons the cost will be great. But it also is entirely clear that this child is the source, the means, the personification of all that human beings hope for. His is the life that changes all life. Simeon knows that his life has come to completion; "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace . . .". He can rest – let go – in the knowledge that God is indeed with us. As Mother Julian put it centuries later, "All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well". Candlemas offers us that exact sense of conviction that whatever has to be faced *can* be faced: that God, as the hymn proclaims, *is* working his purpose out as year succeeds to year.

Thanks be to God.