

Candlemas

3 2 13

Almighty and ever-living God,
clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son
was this day presented in the Temple,
in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you,
with pure and clean hearts
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Luke chapter 2 and verse 32:

'a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

February 2nd, which we remember a day late in church today, has three titles: currently the most favoured: 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple' – fact; the least popular, 'The Purification of St Mary the Virgin' (BCP) – let's not go there; and the one I'd like to concentrate on today – 'Candlemas'.

Candlemas is a mediaeval tradition. According to 'Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable', the candles to be used in church that year are brought in to be blessed by the priest. In the dark days of early February, when winter is still very much with us, it seems good to lift the spirits with another festival of light.

But why now a festival of light ? The possible link may be found in today's text:

‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

But before we look at the meeting with Simeon in the Temple in Jerusalem, we might first ask the question why Mary and Joseph have brought Jesus to there forty days after his birth. The answer is to be found in the Torah, the Jewish Law – Leviticus 12 verses 2 to 4 – words which to our 21st century Western Christian ears sound curiously alien: ‘If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are complete.’ Forty days thereafter, she should bring to the priest a sacrifice – a pigeon or turtle dove as a sin-offering (v6). They are there, therefore, because they are good Jews, religious Jews, acting in accordance with the Jewish practice of the time.

Simeon is there because he's been told to go there by the Holy Spirit. He has been promised that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah with his own eyes. He does. Taking the child in his arms, he prophesies in the words we know as the ‘Nunc Dimittis’. Simeon's song is a recognition that Jesus is the Messiah. Now, he can die in peace – his wish has been fulfilled.

But before I come to an end, let's consider briefly at the words of my text today ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ The image

of Jesus as the Light of the World is well known and much loved. In one of our stained glass windows, we have a copy of the celebrated picture by Holman Hunt. The phrase I have off by heart is 'to be a light to lighten the Gentiles' but here in the NRSV it is translated 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' a clearer expression of the theme that has run through our sermons this Epiphany – that of God manifesting himself to Man through his Son, Jesus Christ. The image is simple and effective: to see we need light: Jesus is that light. But the light is universal, all inclusive. The light of Christ is not an 'either . . . or' but a 'both . . . and' for as the second half of the text clearly says 'and for glory to your people Israel'. As Christians, we may claim Christ for our own, forgetting that Jesus was a Jew and came first to his people, the Jews. So there we have it: Christ the light of the world is there as a light for all people, at all times, in all places – a truly catholic vision of Christianity.

So let me conclude today with the encouraging thought that Christ is a light for us all, Jew and Gentile alike. That Candlemas is a celebration of that light and that in Simeon who feels he can die his life fulfilled and complete, we have the model for a good death – content at the end to depart in peace.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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G: Sermon 27 : Candlemas

