

Candlemas – 31st January 2021

We have some glorious music today for today's feast of Candlemas, which is also the feast of the Presentation in the Temple. I think the Greek Orthodox have got the right approach to this feast. They call it, 'The Meeting' or 'The Encounter,' referring to the encounter in the temple between Simeon and Anna and the Christ Child. The shepherds were the first to worship the Christ Child. Then magi, powerful men with the knowledge and money to travel from the distant east, were the second as we celebrated at Epiphany, and Simeon and Anna, two elderly, religious Jews were the third. And this last encounter takes place in the temple as the old religion of the first covenant meets the new life of the second covenant. For Simeon and Anna, it was the culmination of a life spent waiting for the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple."

At the beginning of Advent we were enjoined to 'Wait! Stay awake.' During this pandemic we seem to have been waiting for ever:
waiting in socially distanced queues,
waiting to see family and friends,
waiting to go back to school or to work,
waiting with loved ones in the hope they will get better,
waiting for a vaccine...

I wonder if you share with me a sense of being so involved in waiting that you can't actually do anything. Simeon and Anna had that sense of waiting all their life, until finally after a lifetime, their waiting found fulfilment in the seven-week-old baby in his parents' arms. In the Orthodox church the celebration is combined with a celebration of the feast of the purification of the blessed Virgin Mary, a necessary rite in Judaism after giving birth. The purification occurred 40 days after the birth of a son and so, as Luke explains it, the presentation and the purification occurred on the same trip to the temple.

The Orthodox church make more of it than we do. On the eve of the feast there are celebrations for a whole day and then for a week afterwards the celebrations continue and there is a blessing of beeswax candles in honour of Christ, the light of the world. I've brought beeswax candles to be blessed and if you have a candle at home I shall bless those too. If you're worried whether the blessing will carry over the internet, I'm not. God created gravity and time and the electromagnetic waves through which the internet is propagated. So although real face to face blessing is good, we can rejoice in the paradox that God can bless us across the chasm of eternity and be present with each of us in our homes, at the same time as being infinitely distant.

There are other paradoxes here. The Virgin Mary who is pure presents herself for purification and the one who will redeem the world is presented in the temple to be redeemed by the poor man's offering of a dove. It is reminiscent of Jesus' baptism where John the Baptist says, "I can't baptise you! You should be baptising me!" But Jesus says, "Please do it, that we might fulfil all righteousness."

And the candles? What is that about? The seventeenth century Pope Innocent attributed the traditional candlelit procession to the appropriation of an ancient pagan rite. He wrote: "The pagans dedicated the month of February to the infernal gods, and as at the beginning of it Pluto stole Proserpine, and her mother Ceres sought her in the night with lighted candles, so the pagans, at the beginning of the month, walked about the city with lighted

candles. Because the holy fathers could not extirpate the custom, they ordained that Christians should carry candles in honour of the Blessed Virgin.”

It's not clear if Pope Innocent actually had any evidence for this but whether or not it's true, February is the month when the mornings begin to be lighter, the light is growing stronger. We feel it as our ancestors did. Like us, they walked with a lighter step as the dark days of January passed. We can smell on the breeze that spring is coming. Vaccinations are being rolled out to younger age groups. Ash Wednesday is less than three weeks away. Rather than springing from a pagan festival, the Candlemas celebration is older and deeper than a pagan celebration. It is a celebration of gratitude to the God of creation who created the seasons, and experienced human joy and suffering in the incarnation.

So later in the service I'm going to ask you to increase the light in your life – by lighting a candle, turning on an electric light, drawing a blind or curtain wide or even opening a window to let in the light! The encounter of Simeon and Anna in the temple with the Christ Child was their encounter with the light of the world. Our own experience of earthly light can be a reminder of the heavenly light of that encounter, and all it led to.