

## CANDLEMAS TODAY

Candlemas is a Festival on the cusp. We are on a boundary, looking both backwards and forwards. On the one hand we are marking the end of the 40 days of the Christmas season, looking back to our celebration of Christ's birth. But, looking ahead, we will soon be in Lent, so we are also beginning to turn towards Good Friday and Easter. The story we read in today's Gospel of Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the Temple beautifully reflects this dual emphasis.

First of all, there's Simeon. With Jesus in his arms, he prays that God will let him in go in peace now that he has seen the salvation he has prepared for all people. Simeon stands for a past that has been lived within the purposes of God, a past that has been moving towards this very moment. Now at last the time has come and he has seen the Lord's Messiah so he can die happy.

Then there's Anna, who stands for trust in God's future. As a member of the tribe of Asher, which was wiped out early in Israel's history, and as an elderly widow, she represents the dispossessed, and as so often in the gospel story, these are the ones who see truly and so can be trusted to understand God's purposes. She recognises the nature of this child, and gives thanks to God that the future is in his hands.

And finally there is Mary. Mary stands for one who lives in the present moment. Just nine months before she had said her "Yes" to the angels' invitation, and now she hears from Simeon that her child is going to be a source of conflict and that she will be caught up in the suffering that will result. She is entirely focussed on the child she has brought to birth.

In our busy lives, we often find ourselves at odds with time. It's all too easy to idolise the past, remembering how things used to be, basking in a rosy glow of nostalgia. Or we can resent our hurts or mistakes, and wallow in regret. The past can easily imprison us. And it's the same with the future. We can find ourselves paralysed by anxiety over a future which may appear increasingly uncertain and bleak. So it's great blessing if we can manage to live each day, fully in the present moment. And

what is true for each of us, is equally true for our country as a whole. We find ourselves today on our own cusp of history, struggling to forge a future that is true to our past story. Simeon was grateful that he had seen the salvation that God had prepared for all people. What, we might ask, does 'salvation' mean for this country at the moment? As we consider the significance of Candlemas, here are one or two thoughts in the light of our present situation ...

The first is that darkness is a necessary part of our lives. It allows us to experience the light. Our fears and anxieties are human responses to life's uncertainties, but they are not necessarily bad in themselves. They challenge us to confront those things that we most dread, and take practical steps to address them. Looking back, we may find that it is precisely at the times when we are most aware of the darkness that light begins to dawn. Certainly that is the way God loves to work, as he demonstrated most powerfully in the resurrection of the Lord. Christian faith never underestimates darkness. Easter does not come after Good Friday, but through it. Life comes through death, light through darkness. So in our own experience, we often have to go through the dark times, the times we fear the most, in order to know the reality of new light and life. This is a truth that is very hard to trust, particularly when you find yourself in the midst of anxiety or grief, but it is something that in our times of normality, we can pray to be helped to practice when the hard times come. At the moment it is particularly necessary for us to trust the light of God's providential care.

Secondly, peace is often hardly won. Simeon was glad that he could die in peace now that he had seen God's salvation embodied in the baby in his arms. But that does not take into account the many years he must have spent waiting and longing for God to reveal his promised saviour. Who knows what ridicule he had to endure, what doubts he had to contend with. The gift of peace doesn't come cheap.

This is true of the peace that Jesus promises us. It is rooted and grounded in the values of love and forgiveness, justice and mercy, which he taught in his ministry and lived out in his life. These are challenging to live by, and strike at the root of many of the priorities on which our society operates. Thankfully there have been people in every age who have glimpsed this vision and have sought, in however stumbling and inadequate a fashion, to walk through life as agents of his love. So we give thanks for

a world in which none should be superior or inferior in worth, and the only privilege is serving others. A world in which each should be valued not for what he or she has, but for what he or she is: a unique child of God. A world in which we are called to see beyond the narrow loyalties of race or social class. And not least, a world in which we should be listening to those with whom we disagree, and in which we can learn to forgive, and to receive forgiveness. Living this way in our world will not necessarily make for an easy life. But it will be a life that in the end will be filled with peace. That is what Jesus promised and has been born out in the experience of many lives.

Finally, Simeon prophesied that Jesus would be “the glory of my people Israel”. Glory is an important word in the New Testament, and when it is applied to Jesus, it usually has a double reference, firstly to the glory that belongs to him through his relationship with his heavenly Father, but secondly, to the glory that was revealed, paradoxically, on the Cross. The supreme revelation of glory in Jesus earthly life is his death, because it is here that the nature of the Godhead as vulnerable, suffering Love is most clearly revealed. What is so wonderful is that by his grace God has invited each of us to enter into the mystery of Christ’s saving death and resurrection so that we can participate in his victory. When Jesus says “This is my body; this is my blood; do this in remembrance of me”, he is inviting us to enter into the very salvation that Simeon foretold. And that is what we are enacting today in this Eucharist.

As we look back to the celebration of Christ’s birth, and look forward to marking his death and resurrection, we are recognizing that as we travel through the Church’s Year, Christmas and Easter are celebrated as separate festivals, as if Jesus’ birth and death had different meanings. But the fact is that we see Christ best when we see him whole, a single revelation of the glory of God in terms of flesh and blood. Christmas incorporates Easter, just as Easter incorporates Christmas. “The Word became flesh; he made his home among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”

This year we are celebrating Candlemas at a particularly important moment. In our darkness, we turn to the light of Christ. In our world of fear and anxiety, we seek

Christ's peace. And in a world that so often seems conflicted and lacking in hope, we long to glimpse the glory that Jesus reveals, a glory that can transfigure our lives.