

Sermon for Candlemas 2021 with Intercessions

Readings For the Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Malachi 3.v.1-5 Psalm 84 Luke 2.v.22-40

“ Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.....”

Priests (like Michael our Dean today, Rob last year and me...goodness, 12 years ago) especially those priests who retire at Candlemas do not miss the significance of Simeon's prayer prayed towards the end of a long life of ritual and devotion in the glorious Temple in Jerusalem.

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

Firstly, they look back to the sharing of joys and sorrows experienced with those around them but especially with the “hatched, matched and despatched” as they as priests ritualised life's events and gave special meaning to those whose companionship they have shared in one degree or another. And, then, they look forward (with feelings probably tinged with relief..... sorry, but that's how it feels for a little while.... And then we miss you!) gazing into that uncertain time ahead of unpredictable length---just like everyone else in their retirement! But they live in hope that all that has been wrestled with, preached on, prayed for over the years will be found to have been true and so(in the end) God's everlasting arms will indeed hold them. His salvation will be fully known in the Christ they put their trust in and who provided fortitude to keep going on in their journey of faith, encouraging others to travel with them.

Most of these reflections are yours too!

Today, in Luke's telling of the story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and the Purification of his mother, a ritual about to happen according to the Law demonstrates the close-belonging relationship with God available to all Jews. Those old rituals (because of Christ) are surpassed, enriched, extended, fulfilled and nearly completed by new ones as His Good News is handed down from one generation to another, known in flesh and blood through bread and wine. No longer just hoped for by the prophets, His presence comes into our world on this day, marked ceremonially with a procession of candles-hence Candlemas (sadly not possible on this occasion) as a loving presence available to all.

With the decline and belief in religious ritual in our age, we can hardly conceive what is being lost to the world. Luke's story speaks of contentment in old age. Contentment is a rare commodity but Simeon says:-

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation”

As people who have a measure of faith, we should ask ourselves why that is. We may conclude that the eyes of the world have not seen the one who offers(is) salvation. Many have ceased to look for it, failing even to think it may all be God-given where everything is gift.It makes a difference. However, there are those who say, surprisingly, the lockdowns have sharpened their vision, revealed so much, freshened their view of things they took for granted. And they see it all with new eyes! And it's good, as it was in the beginning.

Just like Simeon and Anna and the others who were with them in the Temple that day saw with new eyes a child and his parents coming to do for him what was required according to the old Law.

These senior citizens nudged by the Holy Spirit had a purpose for being in the Temple. They were seeking, waiting for that moment when they would know that God would be true to his promises. They were ready! Salvation (the fulfilment of their deepest yearnings as spoken of by the prophets like Malachi) would come before they died. Salvation was the promise. And at that very moment, the Christ-child was brought into the Temple.... A tiny child (40 days old) who... (we may imagine) fixes his eyes on them, smiles (no, it's not wind) and, unswaddled is able to do what he comes to do....he blesses them. Well, that's what some of the iconographers suggest, as Simeon takes hold of him in his arms, given to him by his mother! And all is Glory.....Gloria! Heaven sings for them all!!!

“O that we were there! O that we were there! we sing in a carol about another occasion.

If to them in their time, why not to you and me, some of us also full in years, frequenting our places rich in ritual, when we can (and we will again!) be in the right place at the right time hoping to see for ourselves, God's presence enfleshed . After all, did not the prophets say often to participants and spectators alike

“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him whilst he is near”

“One day in his courts is better than a thousand” (on a Greek Island suggests Eugene Petersen in his translation of the Psalms). But we don't have to travel to a Temple far away, like pilgrims. Through Jesus WE have become Temples in whom the Lord dwells. The Christ abides in us.

What will this child become? They ask

Who is being revealed to the nations?

They are our questions too.

Simeon describes all this and Anna praises God thankfully for all that has been made known and will be made known. “It's in the Book” Victor Borge used to say. It's in the Book for our consolation and redemption. That's our contentment at any age! Take the opportunity on your journey of faith this Lent (make it a Live Lent) to use the church's rituals and devotions to turn away from Christmas and look towards Easter on the other side of the Cross with contentment because we learn how we are held in love by our heavenly Father.

But think about this ancient observation as you go with your comfort blanket removed to be unswaddled Christians in this age in need of salvation, free to love as we are commanded by Him.

The Christ child is made to say:

I am not held by the old man: it is I who holds him, for he asks me forgiveness.

We need to too!

Revd Chris Fletcher

Prayers of Intercession for Candlemas

Let us pray to the Father through Christ who is our Light and our Life

Father, your Christ is acclaimed as the glory of Israel: Look in mercy on your church sharing his light:

Father, your Christ in the Temple brings judgement on the world: Look in mercy on the nations who long for his justice:

Father, your Christ, who was rich, for our sakes became poor: Look in mercy on the needy, suffering with him:

Father, your Christ is the one in whom faithful servants find their peace: Look in mercy on the departed who see your salvation:

Father, your Christ is the one revealed as the one destined to be rejected: Look in mercy on us who now turn towards his passion:

Lord God, you kept faith with Simeon and Anna and showed them the infant King. Give us grace to put all our trust in your promises, and the patience to wait for their fulfilment, through Jesus Christ our Lord.