

Candlemas: The Presentation of Christ in Temple, 2 February 2025

Readings: Malachi 3.1-5, Psalm 24.[1-6]7-10, Hebrews 2.14-18, Luke 2.22-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

Wow! I am simply overwhelmed by this rich gospel fare from Luke! I cannot do it justice. There is so much going on as the different titles used to describe this feast of the Church indicate coming as it does forty days after Christmas therewith concluding the season of Christmas. The titles are Candlemas, The Purification of the BVM and The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. It is of interest to note that the 1662 Book of Common Prayer refers to Candlemas as 'The Presentation of CHRIST in the Temple, commonly called, the Purification of St. MARY the Virgin' therewith indicating something that distinguishes us from other Protestants. (We did protest.) It is our appreciation of the saints: one, because we want to affirm the working of God's Holy Spirit in men and women down the centuries and in every age and two, we come to know that to study these lives can be beneficial in our own walk with God, as we seek to grow in grace being filled with wisdom, that we may not only mature in Christ as individuals, but as we explored last Sunday for the common good of the building up of the Body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

As already stated there is so much going on in this passage that you can lose sight of the forest for the trees; that is why Candlemas, the name usually employed to describe this Jesus feast, is helpful as a guiding light. It directs our attention to one particular verse in today's Gospel: "to be a light to lighten the Gentiles". These words are spoken by a devout and righteous Jew informed and guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon, who was waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled. In Jesus he sees God's promises fulfilled. On seeing Jesus he can let go of this life. He gives voice to this letting go in the canticle we commonly call the Nunc Dimittis or in modern parlance the Song of Simeon. On seeing the infant child Simeon can now say, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace". Why? He gives the answer,

"Because my eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before all people, ... the glory of thy people Israel".

He is deeply satisfied. He has assurance. He can lay down his head. Now he can die knowing that God in Jesus has fulfilled what was promised long ago to make a people his own. He is ready to be with the Lord. His prayer is one we can echo that we too may die in peace. This frame of mind should be a characteristic and a virtue of each and every Christian. It finds expression for example in the opening sentence of Compline, the Night Prayer of the Church: The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end. Amen.

Paul gives expression to this from another perspective having acquired a Simeon-like frame of mind, the affirming love for the gift of life that embraces the gift of life eternal. These two lives, here and eternal, for the Christian walk hand in hand, fitting as fist in glove. Paul's perspective is that of the mourner, of the bereaved. We all know loss. We all mourn. We all treasure memories, which are tinged with loss for what was. I often think of my youth in Canada with gratitude. My time in Germany at boarding school, or my years of study in Canada, England and Germany and what came after with gratitude. So rich in so many ways! Not all of it was easy. I didn't just sail through life. I have known knocks along the way and have had hurdles to overcome. Back to Paul who writes from the perspective of the mourner, "... do not grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again,...." and "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:19)

I trust through the elucidations above you can appreciate that the Nunc Dimittis, the Song of Simeon has always taken up a special place in the life of the Church and in the heart of the Christian. Of this I am sure, the Song of Simeon should be a part of every funeral service, and it should be recited by all who attend believing that death, the last enemy death has been overcome through Christ. Cardinal König is known for stipulating that the Paschal Candle, the Easter Candle should be beside his coffin. Likewise for me it is the Paschal Candle, but also the Nunc Dimittis.

Simeon does not only perceive this baby "to be a light to lighten the Gentiles", but being a Jew this baby is also for "the glory of thy (God's) people Israel". God has not forsaken his

people in favour of a better group, anybody but the people of Israel, but rather Jesus as Saviour is for both Gentiles and Israel from the beginning. These two will become one people in God by a common confession, Jesus is Lord! The Gentiles will be grafted in. (cf. Romans 11:17-27; Ephesians 2:10–3:6) Israel will fulfil her vocation not through a people, but through a person, God incarnate, Jesus, the one who saves both man and beast. (Psalm 36:6) Jesus is the Light for the world and the Light of the world and the Glory and Height of Israel. As Isaiah foretold, ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear’ says the Lord (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14.11) The universality of Simeon’s song backed by Anna is at the heart of the Christian gospel, as expressed in say the Book of Revelation – every tribe, language and nation – or in Paul’s Greek or Jew, slave or free, man or woman.

Candlemas is the day on which candles are lit! We, as Christians, have something special to give the world through the Holy Spirit. It is the Light that is Christ. It is this Light you and I are called to bring to the world through our lives in words and deeds. May it pervade us anew. It is a light that embraces justice and mercy, truth and peace willing under the direction of God to speak with the prophet’s voice into our today. In this Light we are to live. This Light we are to bring to our work, our home, our play, our relationships, our decision making, however uncomfortable this might be. May we be less cowardly and seek with the uncharacteristically fainted-hearted Lion in The Wizard of Oz the confidence that allows us to speak again as Church with our friends, colleagues, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ with a spirit of generosity and openness with ears to listen with consideration without dissing people or ditching them, but by staying the course.

That we as Christians have become unsure of ourselves is evident. We have lost our nerve. For that reason we are to embrace faith anew encouraged by Anna and Simeon. Faith is a source of life and strength to be lived in humility and obedience and which belongs to ages past. By this I do not mean the bravado of many forms of modern Christianity, which have a certainty that in the words of a hymn “He [Christ] will not own”. We trust that we are a people of prayer, therefore make time to join us for the Ecumenical study day on prayer. We trust that we are a people who know what the Church, the Body of Christ believes, therefore

make time to join us for the three Soundings sessions on the Nicene Creed being led by Dr Michael Dormandy, as we mark its being agreed upon in 325. Additionally given that the pilgrimage to Italy is going ahead - at the heart of which is Christ as lived and seen by Francis of Assisi - consider prayerfully joining us.

Given that last invitation and the mention of St. Francis I am going to add a quote that may seem disconnected to the above, but I like to think not, as it references Christmas through which we too may encounter the tenderness of God as loving parents, Joseph and Mary, bring their first born to the Temple to do what is required of them as God's people. The quotation is by Brother William Short (OFM) is:

"In many ways ... [Christians through the] Franciscans are the heirs of a strain of Christian spirituality derived from Bernard of Clairvaux... (1090-1153). What was this new image of Christ, ...? It was an emphasis on the human Christ most frequently invoked with the tender name of Jesus, calling the Lord ... by his first name. The tenderness of Bernard of Clairvaux that we hear in his Christmas sermons, the affectivity of his prayers and the devotions that he encouraged, deeply shaped Francis [of Assisi] ... This softening of the figure of Christ was accompanied by a newfound tenderness toward his mother... understood now as a human mother nursing her weak infant at the breast. This tender mother who now even in her poses in the art of the time has come down from the stiff imperial throne of the judgment to be presented to believers as "an object of tenderness and maternal affection".\* This change in ... [Christian] spirituality, this understanding of another dimension of the person of Christ will make it possible for Francis and his followers to reimagine the figure of Jesus presented in the Gospels."

Is this Francis' and his followers' lasting contribution to the life of the Church to help us draw close to the loving tenderness of God in Jesus made manifest, we may ask?

A much loved Christian hymn 'In the Bleak Midwinter' conveys tenderness ending with a verse that I suspect has moved us all at one time or other, it did me, being first moved by the vulnerability and the tenderness of God made manifest in Jesus by our keeping of Christmas year on year reminding ourselves of something truly tender and lasting namely love came down at Christmas:

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,  
if I were a wise man I would do my part,  
yet what I can I give him, give my heart.

Let us learn to give our hearts today, tomorrow and the day after to the Lord Jesus praying with Paul who assures saying,

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3.18,19) **Amen.**

\*St. Francis of Assisi: A New Way of Being Christian:  
Topic 2, Growing Up in Assisi (1182-1200), Bother William Short, OFM  
4 January 2008

<https://podcasts.apple.com/at/podcast/st-francis-of-assisi-a-new-way-of-being-christian/id1589853366?i=1000538265626&r=0>