

Epiphany 4, 28 January 2024, Year B:
Revelation 12.1-5a and Mark 1.21-28: Potpourri sermon

The Christmas season ends on 2 February, forty days after Christmas Day with the celebration of The Presentation of Christ in the Temple sometimes called the Purification of Mary, reminding us, should anyone be in doubt, that Mary too was under the Law. She too was in need of salvation.

The Presentation in the Temple is commonly known as Candlemas and in German Lichtmess. Why because it is customary to bless candles on that day of the Christian year/calendar and with lit candles in hand to walk into a church or out into the world from the church both places always in need of the light of Christ, who illumines us as Christians by his word and sacraments as we recently prayed.

At the end of today's service we will bless the candles the Kids' Church children have made, so that they might light them in their homes on 2 February, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Candlemas. Hopefully on that occasion they will also read with their parents and siblings the incident that gave rise to this feast in Luke's gospel.

Why do we bless candles on Candlemas? Why is light a feature of this feast? I know many of you know the answer, but not all. Who taught you? Can you remember? I am conscious that we are a church that benefits from the good work of others in the main as Christians join us as adults, but not only from Anglican/Episcopal churches. Soon we will be saying farewell to Daniel and Wilma raised in a different tradition of being church, the Body of Christ and who found a home with us while working for Operation Mobilisation and have been a blessing to us. It is a testimony that people find their way to us from other Christian denominations finding here something that resonates with the faith of their upbringing: a place to be a Christian and grow as a Christian.

Light plays such a prominent feature because of the words of Simeon who knew himself blessed. Simeon proclaims although great in age, Lord “my eyes have seen thy salvation [Jesus] which thou hast prepared before the face of all people to be a light a light to lighten the Gentiles and to the glory of thy people Israel.” (Luke 2.29-32) Jesus is to be the glory of Israel. He is the glory of Israel. This we believe and this we confess. This beautifully crafted poem holds the tension that the light of Christ is truly for everyone and is to become everyone’s glory both Jews and Gentiles, while being a light to the Gentiles. This has been and remains the Church’s contention. The poem is recited daily either at Evening Prayer according to the Book of Common Prayer or at Compline the last prayer office (meaning service) of the Church’s day.

Now it has become common to move major festivals to Sundays. It is more practical. It is convenient. No one has to go out of their way. As someone who seeks to live, as best I can, the Christian year I regret this utilitarian development very much, especially as it relates to some of the major feasts for one simple reason. The feasts assigned to certain days of the year as they are have something of an unregimented nature reminding us that the extraordinary, the divine breaks into the ordinary, our common lives or as we celebrated on the Feast of the Epiphany that the divine manifests itself in time and place reminding us that we are to set out or that we are already on a journey leading us with the Magi (three kings/wise men) to that very moment of obeisance “and they knelt down and paid [Jesus] homage”. A gesture that many find very difficult to make, because whether we admit it or not we want to be in charge. We want to have dominion. We want to call the shots. We are Lord. Given this widespread attitude, it is a blessing to see people from time to time in fervent prayer. You can even sense that here are people who know their need to start and continue in their earthly pilgrimage from a place of homage, from a place of obeisance, from a place of humility, from a place of devotion.

In Austria we are fortunate that a number of major Christian holy days are also holidays so that we have a better opportunity to observe them. Here I am thinking especially of the Epiphany, Ascension Day and All Saints' Day, which is the great harvest festival of the church. All are safely gathered in. Up and until the introduction of Christ the King in the 20th century All Saints' Day was the climax of the Christian year in which we celebrated the communion of saints a sign of the hope making explicit that death does not have the last word and through which we commemorate, give thanks for and understand ourselves united with this great cloud of witnesses that no man can number, joined through baptism. A gift given and not earned.

Additionally, we are fortunate that in our stained glass windows a few of these saints are depicted. We may have wanted a different arrangement, but the window needs to be understood from the vantage point of its time. The small shield at the foot of the Glorified Christ flanked by angels is Stephen, the first follower of Christ to give his life for Christ, the patron saint of Vienna. Stephen who saw the heavens opened and Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. Who prayed as he was being stoned 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' (Acts 7.60) Either side of the Christ figure are two soldier saints George on your left, best known for slaying the mythical dragon also mentioned in today's reading from the Book of Revelation reminding us that there are forces, collective forces that are set against the gospel. Perhaps you can name some. And on your right, is a depiction of Martin of Tours born close to here in Szombathely in Hungary, which was then called Colonia Claudia Savariensum (Claudius' Colony of Savarians), the capital of the Pannonia Superior home to a temple dedicated to the Mithras cult. Martin like many before and after him leaves his life of Roman privilege to follow Christ in poverty. He is best known for cutting his cloak in two to share with a peasant. It is a privilege to know Christ and follow him. In order to express just how much I regret the conflating of the Christian year, to you probably a small thing, I would have to mourn or lament loudly like a wailing woman.

The above is a celebration in part of the Christian year, but it is also a celebration of our Christian faith manifested in the life of Jesus, the man from Galilee. Our faith makes a difference. It not only impacts on the calendar, but also takes me to today's Gospel, which to my mind packs a punch. Where Jesus makes himself genuinely known, today as then things cannot remain the same, people in time in the presence of Christ and his people reveal themselves for who they are.

Today's episode at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry refers to a single event, but its implications go deep, because wherever Jesus is encountered "unclean spirits" make themselves known. People even today ask, Was geht mich das an, Dein Jesus! "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" And that Jesus is perceived as a threat to the "unclean spirits" very existence is articulated made explicit in their question. Have you come to destroy us? Jesus does not come to destroy, but to give light and life, joy and a right judgement. A way to escape the trap of the fowler of our own making. It may feel like Jesus has come to destroy, which is a telling sign of our alienation from God.

I would counsel each to take this episode seriously and allow it to speak to us directly not by diminishing its impact despite a gap of two thousand years. These "unclean" or "evil" spirits mentioned in the Gospels have a kind of counterpart in Paul's letters. Here I mention lying, divining, idolatry, chasing after other gods, often graphically described in the Bible as whoring after other gods and one that we can deal with now a growing tendency to use the name of the Lord in vain. I am deeply offended by people who curse and swear using the name and title Jesus Christ. After all it is the name above all names. The above list of lying, deception, trickery, idolatry chasing after other gods, cursing and divining is not exhaustive. There are many more.

There has been a quiet movement to restore the practice of faith to the home. One little step is being taken this morning with the blessing of the Kids' Church Lichtmess

candles. When our children were young we introduced these prayer dice. One to be thrown in the morning to welcome a new day and the other to be used at meals. Besides blessing the candles at the end of the service we will bless one of our youngest members Chiara meaning luminous thanking God again her life and that she has successfully navigated the first year of her life. That not being all, we will also bless one of our oldest members Hyacinth. Hyacinth has not kept it a secret that she turned 90 on the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul. Throughout her life Hyacinth and even when exploring to my mind some esoteric beliefs and practices has consistently witnessed to Christ as her Lord and Saviour, the rock on which she stands. Today we give thanks to God for Hyacinth, for her faith, her commitment to Christ and her presence amongst as a sister in Christ here at Christ Church Vienna.

God be merciful unto us, and bless us;
And cause his face to shine upon us;
That God's way may be known upon earth,
God's saving health among all nations.
Let the people praise thee, O God;
Let all the people praise thee. **Amen.**
(From Psalm 67)