

May the words of my lips and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer

Today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas, this year the 2nd of February falls on a Tuesday, and so it is today that many Churches will be remembering the feast of Candlemas or the 'presentation of Christ in the temple'. This is the day when we remember those famous words from Simeon's lips which has become our Nunc Dimittis: 'LORD, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: to be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel'.

These words have been, sung, spoken, and recited at evensong up and down the country for centuries, in some places daily. These are the words I spoke at my Dad's bedside after he took his final breath and these are the words I enjoyed singing at choir during some of my formative years. This feast is also a time when Eccard's anthem is sung: 'When to the temple Mary went' a sweet song that some of you will be familiar with, that brings back happy memories of times spent in church pews or choir stalls.

I think it is poignant how when often one person ends their life or time in a place there is a new beginning for someone else. It is a common occurrence and it is so much a part of what life is: life, death, endings and beginnings. When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew that his time had come.

Candlemas is the first time that Jesus entered the temple. This would have been a joyous time for Mary and Joseph. Yet they would have also have heard from Simeon that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. Originally the Feast of Candlemas was known as the 'meeting' because on this day Jesus came to the Temple and was greeted by the prophets Anna and Simeon. In the course of time the two names the 'Presentation' and the 'Purification' were given to this feast and later still it was known as 'Candlemas' from its association with the Church's blessing and distribution of candles for all people, for the whole year. And as a verger, I can only wonder, where on earth all those candles stored!

There is a manuscript dated 1414 from the Council of Constance which contains two pictures of Candlemas ceremonies, in one the Pope and other clergy are standing in a gallery and beneath them the laity are assembled, the Pope appears to be hurling very large candles among the people and some of which fall to the ground. Perhaps not the most dignified or safe method of distributing candles?! The other picture shows the distribution of candles at the doors of houses of folk who were not at the service. Some of the doors in the picture are shut, and no one seems to be at home. One figure looks out of the window, with an expression suggesting that he has no intention of opening the door. This calls to mind the idea that some are closed to Christ and reminds me of the Holman Hunt painting 'The Light of the World' with the grown up, adult Jesus knocking at a closed door.

The connection with Jesus being the light of the world and entering the temple for the first time is a striking thought. And I'm sure for those of you who have had young children Baptized or celebrated in church this special time of bringing the little one, you love before God is memorable and poignant.

Candlemas is celebrated forty days after Christmas and so we continue to celebrate and remember Christ's appearing and Christ with us. Easter is early this year, there will be a short season of ordinary time between now and Ash Wednesday. This feast of Candlemas looks in two directions, it points back to Jesus's birth and looks forward with the searching prophesy of Simeon - that Christ will be a sign to be rejected, that his vocation is to suffer and this reminds us of the nearness of Lent.

Luke is the gospel writer that tells us of Christ entering the temple for the first time. Luke's message is for everyone. No matter who you are or where you are, the story of Jesus, from the feeding trough in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story. In becoming your story, it will become your vocation, for everyone has their own role in God's plan. For some, it will be active, obvious, working in Christian ministry, preaching or outreach, taking the love of God to meet the practical needs of the world. For others, it will be quiet, away from the public view, praying faithfully for God to act. And for many it will be a mixture of the two. Mary and Joseph were destined to meet Simeon and Anna, Simeon and Anna had been waiting for

Mary and Joseph. And so it is with Jesus's birth that all sorts of people are drawn together into relationship and fellowship with one another.

The birth of this little boy Jesus, is the beginning of a confrontation between the Kingdom of God, in all its apparent weakness, insignificance and vulnerability and the kingdom of the world. Jesus is the true ruler of the world not Caesar or any other politician I dare to mention. And Jesus will become the temple. How easy it could have been to fill this picture with royal colours, a sense of future dominion, power and glory. However, Luke does the opposite; the humble offering that Mary and Joseph bring is a pair of doves (the offering of poor people, not the lamb for those who could afford it). This is a more sombre picture, it is not what people expected and it becomes a story of suffering.

Candlemas is a festival of birth and light, a story of living, ageing and learning. The wisdom of age, the years of struggling and hurting and loving, the presenting of themselves regularly in the communal round of worship, the prayers of a lifetime – these are the experiences of Simeon and Anna who recognise God in Jesus and have confidence in the safety and vulnerability of God's love.

Living and dying, striving for holiness and justice, accepting forgiveness, living with questions – these are the elements of life and loving that dance and burn for us in the candles of Candlemas. And it is light that is offered to us, lit by God's fire that we too may be light and warmth in the world.

To end, here is a simple prayer based on a poem by Annie Johnson Flint called 'what God hath promised' and one that I think is appropriate for Candlemas:

God hath not promised skies ever blue,
Flower stewn pathways always for you,
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow,
Peace without pain,
But he hath promised strength from above, Unfailing sympathy,
Undying love.
Amen