

Sermon for 31st January 2021 (Candlemas) Luke 2:22-40, Malachi 3:1-5

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV.

A few years ago, I discovered, much to my delight, that in lots of countries nativity sets are left up until Candlemas on 2nd February. As a result, we now keep our nativity sets up when we take the tree down, and so manage to postpone the final sad end to Christmas. This year, because I felt we needed something bright and cheerful, we've left some lights up too. I always say these things are for the children, but I wonder whether they are really more for me!

Candlemas celebrates the purification of Mary after the birth of Jesus, but it has also always had an emphasis on light. Candles would be blessed in church and then there would then be a lighted procession around the parish. All very appropriate for a dark time of year, and why, under normal circumstances, in St Matthew's and All Saints we have our Christingle services in early February. Candlemas has also been connected with folklore about the weather; if it is a dry day, winter will continue; but if it's wet winter is nearly over. This explains why 2nd February is also Badgers' Day in Germany - and apparently parts of Huntingdonshire as well - and, more famously perhaps, Groundhog Day in the US.

For those of you who have seen the film, lockdown life may make you feel a bit like you are trapped in Groundhog Day. Day after day, week after week, everything feels and seems and looks the same. But I think today's readings help to show us that there is a way out of that feeling.

First of all, let us imagine what it was like on that day when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple. In Luke's narrative, this was probably Jesus's first journey after his birth. Despite all the extraordinary things that had happened to the young couple, they were still clearly taken aback when a complete stranger took the baby in his arms and spoke words of prophecy. I expect Simeon was surprised too. After all, when he had been promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, I don't think he was imagining that the Messiah would be a tiny baby, brought to the temple by a poor couple from a small town.

But he knew that the baby was who he had been waiting for, because the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned three times in these verses, had told him so. The first two chapters of Luke, like the rest of the gospel, are drenched in the Holy

Spirit, who has already been shown guiding and strengthening Zechariah, Mary and Elizabeth. Now the Spirit confirmed to Simeon that Jesus was the one he had been waiting for. This was the arrival prophesied by Malachi four hundred years before: “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” And there he was, without any fanfare: the wait was over. Simeon had trusted in the word of the Spirit, and that word had been fulfilled.

We may not get as clear instructions as those Simeon received, or be called on to give such a dramatic witness to Christ, but the Holy Spirit is there for us, and will guide and strengthen us. So, no matter how we may feel we are coping with lockdown, or anything else that the world throws at us, the Spirit is with us and will help us endure this time of waiting, just as it did for Simeon.

The Holy Spirit was surely behind the beautiful words Simeon speaks over the baby, which include one of the great truths of our faith: Jesus will be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” As Isaiah put it, “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” God’s message and God’s kingdom are for everyone, and we all have a role to play in them. Luke shows this in the two pairings in today’s reading, Simeon and Anna, and Mary and Joseph. Simeon, by taking the baby in his arms, represents tradition embracing the new. Anna, recognising Jesus, instantly starts to spread the word “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem”, that is to all those who like her, and like Simeon, had been waiting for the Messiah to come. Anna we are told was an elderly widow, and it is assumed that Simeon, who peacefully accepts that his time has come after he sees Jesus, was probably elderly as well. Luke shows us that no matter someone’s age, gender or circumstances they can have a crucial role in spreading God’s word and witnessing to Christ: there is never a point in your life when you cannot be called to share the gospel. But, God will call people we might not expect, in ways we might not expect, to do things we might not expect.

Mary and Joseph, meanwhile, were not, as I said earlier, the sort of couple that would have been expected to turn up at the temple carrying an infant Messiah. The sacrifice they offered when they dedicated Jesus to God was not the lamb and a pigeon or turtledove of the well off, but the two turtledoves or pigeons of the poor; when they left Jerusalem, they would return to their ordinary lives in an insignificant town. To quote Nathaniel in John 1:46, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” God chose a couple who were on the edge of society, and he gave them the extraordinary task of raising and caring for his son. They were exactly the sort of people - the poor labourers, the

widows, the orphans, the refugees - that Malachi makes a point of saying that God will bring justice to. As Pope Francis puts it, "when God wanted to regenerate creation, he chose to go to the margins.... because they were...places full of possibility."

God, then, is there for us all, no matter who we are, where we are from, or what our circumstances are. This would have been an astonishing message at the time, and that may explain why Mary and Joseph "were amazed at what was being said" by Simeon.

And this brings me back to Candlemas, and the focus on light, "a light for revelation." That light shone out from the temple in Jerusalem to every nation, to all people, just as had been promised in Isaiah: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The light of Christ is a wonder to us all. It guides us through the darkness, like the pillar of fire that went ahead of the Israelites in the desert. It strengthens us now particularly as we deal with Covid and its impact, and throughout history has sustained and comforted God's people as they faced bereavement, sorrow, illness, injustice, war, violence, disaster.

In the book "The Eagle of the Ninth", which I could describe as one of my favourite children's books but will very happily admit to you is in fact one of my favourite books full stop, one scene finds the heroes Marcus and Esca in desperate need of light as their lamp starts to go out. Marcus urges Esca to "Think Light", and himself thinks of a particular light-filled moment in his life, which he then hurls "against the darkness, forcing it back – back – back." We, however, have a better option than just thinking of light; we can pray to the light of the world, and he will be there for us.

But as well as being a source of strength and comfort, I think that the light is awe-inspiring, so much so that it is even frightening. After all, although God is all loving he is also all powerful, with a might we cannot comprehend. His light is like the refiner's fire mentioned by Malachi and will cleanse and purify us as well, and more intensely than the offerings made by Mary at the temple. Perhaps it can be compared to the sun, which sustains life but is too bright to look upon; God's light is also essential but should similarly be treated with reverence and respect. However, the light and fire also give us strength and bring us through any trial; in Isaiah God declares "I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity." The light of Christ sustains us. It is unquestionably worth waiting for, as Simeon did, and bearing witness

to, as Anna did. Amanda Gorman is the poet who read at President Biden's inauguration, and some of the lines from her poem *The Hill We Climb* feel appropriate here: "...there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we are brave enough to be it."

As we live in our Groundhog Day world of lockdown, we can give thanks for the sustaining and comforting light brought to us not just at Candlemas but for all time. We – all of us - have the Holy Spirit to guide us. Just ask! The gospel is for everyone, as long as we are prepared to reach out and grasp it. The light of Christ can fill our lives if we allow it to. If we are brave enough to let it in, we have a source of wonder and love that can sustain us no matter how deep the darkness. In Malachi 3:6, so just after today's reading, God asks the people to return to him, but knows that they will ask "How shall we return?" The answer to that is to be like Anna and Simeon, Mary and Joseph, and to follow, and share, the light of Christ, today and always.

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