

## The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas)

'Candlemas': that's what everyone calls it, and it's a good name – memorable, short and simple; and it has a long history. Yet the introduction printed in our service booklet doesn't mention candles, nor does the collect. So what's it about?

Another traditional name was The Purification of the Virgin Mary. That *is* in the intro and Gospel reading. But it is hardly something to stir the heart; anyway, she was an exceptionally pure person already! No; the most significant thing on this day is an event in the life of Jesus, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. And that is the actual title of this day in church calendars across the world; they may add 'Candlemas,' but in brackets, or smaller type. It's a 'Principal Feast' in the Church year: a red letter day – literally. But why is that event so important? And why should *this* day be chosen for the blessing of the year's candle supply, and the procession with lit candles – a Candle Mass?

A bit of background: Our Gospel reading marks the end, 40 days after Christmas, of the whole infancy narrative. In what we have heard read today there are two things going on, both laid down in the Torah, the sacred Law. One is that every first-born male (whether animal or human) must be offered to God in sacrifice. That goes back to the Exodus story and the origin of Passover – when the destroying angel killed all the first-born males of Egypt, but *passed over* the Israelite households which had the blood of the sacrificed lamb smeared on their doorways. Mercifully, the Law provided that at the annual celebration, a slaughtered lamb would do as a stand-in for the first-born son. And presenting the child at the temple became the offering of him to the Lord God, and his entry into Judaism.

The second thing, also in the Torah, was that a woman after childbirth was considered 'unclean' and would have to undergo a ceremony of purification. That too included offering a sacrifice at the Temple, of a lamb plus one turtle dove or pigeon. For those who couldn't afford a lamb, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons were allowed instead, for the likes of Joseph and Mary (a telling detail in the account).

They brought little Jesus to the Temple to do what was customary in the Law. There this aged holy man Simeon took him in his arms, recognizing that here was Christ, the Messiah he'd been longing for and waiting for, so now his life could end – in peace. In this baby he perceived God's salvation – not only for 'the consolation of Israel', but salvation prepared 'in the presence of all peoples' – a *light, to lighten* the gentiles. There, of course, is the link to candles, and it will be Simeon's wonderful words that form the final part to our liturgy.

When Christians first held a yearly celebration of this event, They gave it the Greek name *hupapante*, the Meeting. The meeting of Simeon and Jesus; and more, the meeting of two different systems, the old and the new, two contrasting visions of God and of life. Let me re-read part of the Gospel passage.

[Read: Luke 2, 22-32]

With emphasis on the three times Law, and three times Spirit

And then the aged prophet Anna came up; she was inspired to prophesy, praising God and speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Yes! A system totally dependent – often slavishly dependent – on *written laws*. With the arrival of Jesus, that system was giving way to one guided and enlightened and enlivened by the Spirit, the *Holy Spirit of God*. All those hundreds of minutiae giving way to a *person*, whose example and teaching and inspiration would touch on everyday attitudes and behaviour; and more – who would cut through all pretence and show, to the very heart of who we are and what makes us tick.

The presence of Christ brings inspiration, consolation, breaking down of barriers, between Jew and Gentile, male and female, servant and master, black and white, priest and people, rulers and ruled, God and people. At the same time, his presence can also divide, showing up the parts in us that respond to him, and the parts in us that do not. No one is perfect, but the balance in us can tip one way or the other. As Simeon goes on to say: This child is destined for the falling, as well as the rising, of many, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And, especially to Mary: 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

The events and words of this day bear witness to some of the deepest fault-lines and highest possibilities of our own contrary make-up. So they provide a pivotal point in the Church year, with Jesus's birth and infancy story completed and now, signs of what is to come, forewarning of his passion and crucifixion.

Next Sunday marks the start of the countdown to Lent, a reminder to begin thinking and praying about how we can make that a really special time of preparation for renewing our participation in the Easter glory.

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