

**Readings:**

Malachi 3: 1-5

Hebrews 2: 14-18

Luke 2: 22-40

**Jesus – the light of the world**

Today we are celebrating Candlemas – it's a day when we particularly think of Jesus as the Light of the World. Actually Candlemas is on February 2<sup>nd</sup> – Friday – but thanks to the workings of the Church's calendar it's moved to today. The Church's calendar you should realise is like the peace of God – it passes all understanding, at times anyway.

Like several other Christian festivals Candlemas owes its existence in part at least to a secular festival, a festival of lights marking the mid-point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Today is a multi-purpose event and as well as being Candlemas it is also the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and the Purification of the Virgin Mary – although that last is I think probably of more interest to the Catholics among us.

Let's start with Mary. The Jewish law required that a woman who gave birth to a son should undergo a rite of purification forty days after the birth. It's got nothing to do with cleanliness – it's about ritual purity – purity before God. In writing his gospel, Luke gives us information about Mary and Joseph that is not in the other gospels, and it's possible that the information came from Mary herself. Either that or Luke has seen something in the tradition surrounding Jesus' childhood that Matthew didn't see, or didn't know. As told by Luke the story of Mary seems to draw parallels with the story of Hannah in the Old Testament. Hannah had prayed to have a son and promised to God that if he granted her prayer she would dedicate the boy to God. That's what happened and we heard the story of the young boy Samuel two Sundays ago – you can read all this in the first two chapters of the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Samuel in the Old Testament. When Hannah gave Samuel to God she prayed a prayer which is very much like the hymn of praise that Mary said when she was in the early days of her pregnancy and she visited her cousin Elizabeth – the words which are familiar to us today as the church uses it at Evening Prayer where it is known as the Magnificat – it begins 'My soul magnifies the Lord'. So it seems that Luke is drawing a strong parallel between Mary and Hannah. Just as Hannah presented Samuel to God, in our gospel reading, Mary is presenting Jesus to God. Luke says it was something required by the Law, but while that had been the case, in Jesus' time it was no longer in force – I think it something Mary felt she should do, taking Hannah as her guide.

You're probably wondering what all this has to do with Jesus being the light of the world. Be patient – I'm working up to it.

So, here we have the family – Joseph, Mary, Jesus in the temple courts. Mary would not be allowed to go into the Temple itself so all this would be happening in the courtyard area. Then along comes Simeon. A faithful devout man, who Luke tells us was looking for the consolation of Israel. That is a short hand way of saying that he believed that the prophecies of Isaiah about a coming Messiah would be fulfilled. Particularly it refers to the passage in Isaiah chapter 40 that begins Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Hence the consolation. And Simeon believed that God had promised that he would not die before seeing that Messiah in person. Seeing Mary and Joseph and the baby he realised, led by the Holy Spirit that this was the one. Faithful Simeon had been waiting, patiently believing in the promises of

God, trusting and hoping. Now the promise is fulfilled. And Simeon praises God, in the words which have become a favourite part of our church's liturgy, also used at Evening Prayer in the Nunc Dimittis – 'Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace' – words which are often used as well at funerals. I hope you recognised the paraphrase in our gospel hymn – Faithful vigil ended. In that prayer, Simeon describes Jesus as the light to lighten the Gentiles – that is all who are not Jewish, as they come to share in the good news of the Saviour's coming to earth, although his message to Mary is not one of comfort but of warning – pain and sorrow are ahead for Jesus and for her. The way of salvation will not be easy and there will be suffering as well as glory.

So at last we have got there – Jesus is the light of the world. But we mustn't forget faithful Anna, who according to our translation is 84, but many commentators would say that in fact she was 105. What matters is that she too had been patiently waiting, trusting in the promises of God, faithfully watching out for the one who was coming as the Messiah. Her life of faithful service and prayer has given her insight into God's purposes and how they will be fulfilled.

But it's Simeon's words that are important here – that Jesus is the one who is to bring light to the Gentiles – in other words to be the light of the world, words which Jesus himself used. To see the light is to understand who Jesus is and what it means for us that he came among us and shared our life; to see what his death and resurrection mean for us; and to see what he has promised us by inviting us to share in the life he offers – the life lived in the power of the Spirit, the life that is not ended by death.

To see Jesus is to see God and his way revealed – the way of self-sacrifice and service, that puts others' needs first and self last.

At the beginning of John's gospel we are told that Jesus shines as a light in the darkness – the darkness of what the Bible calls this present age. The light of God's truth, John says, cannot be overcome by the darkness. The light helps us to see. It highlights what is wrong and helps us to see the reality of the situation – that this world can do nothing to save us from all that is wrong. Without the intervention of God in Jesus there would be no hope and no future. We need the light of Christ to help us find the way, the way of truth and life, the way that leads to God and his kingdom.

Simeon and Anna had hope. They trusted in the promise of God and waited patiently, faithfully, knowing that in God's time the promise would be fulfilled. In God's time, Joseph and Mary came bringing the baby Jesus and Simeon and Anna were there to see the promise fulfilled. It was God's timing that they met, just as it was God's timing that Jesus was born when he was.

We too are called to follow the light of Christ and to trust in God. Because of God's faithfulness we can have hope – a sure and certain hope – that his promises will be fulfilled. God's kingdom will become a reality, Christ will return, God's will will be done. Like Simeon and Anna we are called to live faithfully, waiting patiently, trusting in God, living in the light of Christ, helping others to see the light so that they too can have hope, and know Jesus for themselves.

Thanks be to him. Amen.