

## The Significance of Candles

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Most people know, without my having to remind them that Lent lasts for forty days.

Some even do their sums, and ask why there are in fact forty-six days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Eve.

The answer is simple: the Lenten fast is indeed for forty days, but that does not include the six Sundays. You may not and must not fast on a Sunday – any Sunday – because it is the Day of Resurrection, and must always be observed, not as fast, but as feast.

You probably also know that Easter also lasts for forty days, from Easter Day itself to Ascension Day. This time, all the Sundays are counted, because the whole of Easter is a festival.

But I have discovered that not everyone knows that the festival of Christmas lasts for forty days, too.

It's probably because we all know about the 'Twelve Days of Christmas', from the 25<sup>th</sup> December to the 5<sup>th</sup> January, after which comes the Feast of the Epiphany.

But really, that is just Christmas changing gear.

Christmastide does not come to a formal end until 2<sup>nd</sup> February – tomorrow – which is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, sometimes called the Purification of the Virgin Mary, but better known in the English tradition as Candlemas.

In mediaeval times the customs and traditions of Candlemas were very different to our modern day practice.

Robert Herrick, writing in the 17th century penned a poem called 'Ceremony upon Candlemas Eve'.

It has in it the lines

*Down with the rosemary, and so  
down with the bays and mistletoe;  
down with the holly, ivy, all  
wherewith ye dressed the Christmas hall;*

You could be forgiven for thinking that it was a poem about Twelfth Night.

But in Herrick's time, the tradition was to keep the Christmas decorations up for 40 days.

Then, on 2 February, the last day of Christmas, they took them down and, in some rural parts of England at least, burnt them: bonfires to light up dark nights in honour of Christ the world's true light.

There were elaborate ceremonies of blessing tapers and carrying them in procession to light up churches together with much partying, all in the name of acknowledging Jesus' presentation in the Temple, and Simeon's recognition of him as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'.

And I have no doubt that in its time, this Church might well have seen many glorious Candlemas celebrations

And really, if we are going to be true to our tradition, we should not put the Crib away until Candlemas.

And that is why, on this, the Sunday before Candlemas, the Lectionary goes into reverse as it were, and having already given us Jesus' baptism, now takes us back to the Holy Family's visit to the Temple for the ceremony of purification – a ritual closely associated with Christ's birth.

The mediaeval celebrations of Candlemas changed dramatically at the Reformation which, whilst it may have brought many blessings to the English Church, also brought several sillinesses.

One such was a suspicion of symbolism, which was extended even to candles on the altar – or, rather, table, as 'altar' too had become a suspect word.

And I think that to be a great shame for there is a deal of significance associated with altar candles.

In this day and age, we take them for granted as little specks of ornamental light in an electric world; but I would venture to suggest that, flickering little lights though they are, they preach a powerful sermon.

We need to see Candlemas as the third great celebration of the coming of the Light of the World.

The first is Christmas.

At Christmas, the Light shone in the darkness, but only a few received it: Mary and Joseph and the shepherds at the manger.

The second is the Epiphany.

At the Epiphany, the Light cast its bright beams on the Church, on the New Jerusalem, and on the Gentiles – represented by the Wise Men. Each was called out of darkness into the light of Christ.

And now we have the third celebration, Candlemas; today we hear of the Light of the World being placed in the hands of all the faithful; they had the Light, and were themselves to be lights in the world, as echoed in the words of Simeon:

*Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.*

So whilst Candlemas might well have gone the way of most of the weekday festivals, and is largely ignored, we at least have our two candles on the altar.

Traditionally, the one on the left as we look at them is often called the Gospel candle and the other one, the one on the right, the Epistle candle.

The names come from the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer which demand that the Epistle is read from the right of the sanctuary and the Gospel from the left.

However, I like to think of those candles in a slightly different way.

To my mind, one of the candles speaks of God, whilst the other speaks of our neighbour.

First then, the candle that speaks of God.

As children of God we are each made for God; made to worship him and adore him. It is when we feel close to God that we find our fulfilment – the theological term for this is ‘adoration’.

St Augustine describes it perfectly. *Thou hast formed us for thyself, he writes and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.*

Or, to put it another way, when we really worship, when a church service or our own private prayers really engage us and we offer ourselves and all that we have and all that we are to God, then we experience a sense of well-being that tells us, ‘This is what I was made for’.

The other candle is different. It calls us to serve God in the service of our fellow man.

Of all the high-sounding titles that are ascribed to the Pope in Rome, the one which strikes me most is ‘The servant of the servants of God’, and I think that is a title to which we should all aspire: *a servant of the servants of God.*

And that means not picking and choosing whom to love and whom to serve.

A servant cannot just do the pleasant jobs.

As we all know well, some people are easy to love; some service is pleasant to do.

But the servants of the servants of God offer their service on the altar of God's love and that means serving everyone and doing everything – even those we do not like and those jobs we have no wish to do.

*Love your enemies, commands the Lord; do good to them that persecute you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you ... and you will be sons of the Most High.*

That then is the sermon offered by the candles on the altar.

And you know, it is a victorious sermon, for up there, on the high altar, the light they shed shines on the cross, which is the symbol of our faith, the sign of the victory won by Christ for all people.

It is sign of hope.

And candles have a part to play here too.

There are some words about candles that I came across the other day.

Somewhat worryingly it is titled Four Candles – an expression forever linked to the Two Ronnies in the English language of our land.

But that aside, these are words about candles that number four. It is perhaps a little sentimental, but it does have a powerful message

*The Four Candles burned slowly.  
Their Ambiance was so soft you  
could hear them speak...*

*The first candle said, "I Am Peace, but these days, nobody  
wants to keep me lit." Then Peace's flame slowly  
diminishes and goes out completely.*

*The second candle says, "I Am Faith, but these days, I am  
no longer indispensable." Then Faith's flame slowly  
diminishes and goes out completely.*

*Sadly the third candle spoke, "I Am Love and I haven't the  
strength to stay lit any longer." "People put me aside and don't  
understand my importance. They even forget to love those who are  
nearest to them." And, waiting no longer, Love goes out completely.*

*Suddenly...A child enters the room and sees the three  
candles no longer burning. The child begins to cry, "Why  
are you not burning? You are supposed to stay lit until the  
end."*

*Then the Fourth Candle spoke gently to the little boy,  
"Don't be afraid, for I Am Hope, and while I still burn, we  
can re-light the other candles."*

*With Shining eyes the child took the Candle of Hope and  
lit the other three candles.*

*Never let the Flame of Hope go out of your life.  
With Hope, no matter how bad things look and  
are...Peace, Faith and Love can shine brightly in our lives.*

So on this Feast Day, thank God for Candlemas, thank God for the  
candles shining upon the cross, and thank God that each time we see a lit  
candle we are reminded that Christ is the Hope and Light of the World,  
who turns our darkest night into his glorious day.

Amen.

**Mike Rogers**