

## Candlemas

### Luke 2, 22-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Now today, we celebrate the ancient feast of Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The celebration of Candlemas is a very ancient church tradition originating in the late fifth century as a tribute to the light of God's glory that was manifested in Christ Jesus. The earliest known observance within the Church was in the year AD 496, during the time of Pope Gelasius.

Traditionally during Candlemas, candles are blessed, lit, and borne in a procession in celebration to Jesus being the light of the world. In AD 638, Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, proclaimed the importance of the celebration in his sermon to the church, stating: "Our bright shining candles are a sign of divine splendor of the one who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of his eternal light. Our candles also show how bright our souls should be when we go to meet Christ."

We are actually a day late in celebrating Candlemas as the official date was yesterday, the 2nd of February. The sharp minded among you will be able to rapidly work out why that particular date is significant and it is, because it is exactly 40 days after Christmas Day. Why 40 days? Well because the presentation of Jesus in the temple would have occurred on his 40th day on earth.

The Jewish tradition was very prescriptive on this issue. A woman who had given birth was considered to be unclean and had to remain at home until the time came for her to come to the temple with her baby for her ritual purification. The actual period of her household incarceration depended on whether she had given birth to a boy or a girl.

Now I don't know whether this was some subliminal way to encourage women to produce male children but the reward for a male child was that you would come for purification after 40 days but if you had made the cardinal error of having a female child then you were locked up at home to reflect on the error of your ways for a full 80 days!

So our celebration of Candlemas comes exactly 40 days after the 25th of December which makes it February 2nd. Interestingly, in the Eastern Coptic Church, Candlemas is celebrated on February 14th (our St Valentines Day) as they believe that the birth of Christ was at Epiphany and so start counting almost 2 weeks later than we do.

The date of February 2nd is also the mid-point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, which is the basis for various ancient European celebrations that commemorate the annual beginnings of the

agricultural season and so, like many Christian festivals, there is a pagan root to the timing that the early church chose – if the people are used to celebrating then let's make sure they are celebrating for the right reasons.

Another interesting fact concerning Candlemass is that it coincides with what the American's refer to as Groundhog Day.

This is the day that you observe the groundhogs emerge from their burrows at the end of winter. If it's cloudy when the groundhogs emerge then winter is over but if it's sunny, the groundhogs get frightened by their own shadows and quickly scurry back inside which means that winter is going to last for a further 6 weeks.

We have a similar tradition connected to the weather on Candlemas and lots of good old proverbs to go with it. The most famous is probably the one that goes...

If Candlemas Day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another fight  
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain  
Winter won't come again

For the Church, however, Candlemas remains a day of hope and light. It is a time to honor the Lord as the Light of the World and to remind us that we too have that light within us. Why is this? Well let's go back to our reading from Luke's gospel and the story of Jesus' presentation at the temple and the glorious and wonderful faith of Simeon and Anna as they knew with absolute certainty that they were gazing into the eyes of their Lord and Saviour.

Let's take ourselves off to Jerusalem for a moment and into the temple precincts. The Temple itself stands in a much larger open area, itself the size of a small town, with plenty of room for people to come and go, to walk about and meet one another. There are crowds milling about as usual, rich people strolling by with friends and hangers on, soldiers from the occupying forces looking down from their watchtower, animals and birds being bought and sold in the markets by the gate.

There are plenty of beggars about, hoping to cash in on the pilgrim's sense of God's mercy and the obligation to be generous in turn. And there are old people, as always, sitting in the shade, under a tree here and a doorway there.

Most people don't notice the young couple coming in with their little baby. Happens all the time. No different from countless others. But, as they approach, you see one of the old men get up slowly from his seat. He has a strange look in his eyes. What's he thinking? What's he going to say?

You are almost as alarmed as the parents are when he takes the child from them, but his movement and his embrace is as gentle and firm as the love of God. He has seen something nobody else has. He has been

praying and waiting for this moment all his life and now it's come. This is the Messiah; he's seen him with his own eyes and now he can die in peace.

He utters those words that for us are now so familiar from our evening liturgy and from Compline, the words of the Nunc Dimittis. In Latin his words are translated as; "Nunc dimittis servum tuum (Now Thou dost dismiss Thy servant). Dominum secundum verbum tuum in pace (according to Thy Word in peace)" We know them better in the form from the Book of Common Prayer as, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word" And he goes on.. "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 give glory to Israel, Your people"

Wow. A few weeks ago we reflected on that wonderful declaration of faith from Mary in the Magnificat when she visited Elizabeth to tell her of her pregnancy. Here we have another great declaration of total faith; the Song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis. Is it any wonder that we're still repeating these great statements of faith 2000 years after they were uttered?

But let's go back to the temple court as we hear Simeon utter those amazing words for the first time. How do you feel as you hear him say that? What does it make you want to do, or to pray? Perhaps it reminds you and simply makes you grateful for the old people that you know who have been faithful to God throughout their lives and who can now go to their graves in peace and gratitude.

Perhaps it challenges you to reflect on what you should be praying for in your own lifetime. On the things that you long to see happen in God's world, or in your own family, which you will go on waiting and hoping for and trusting that God will let you see.

Perhaps it's more personal; about something in your own life, here and now, which you want to bring to the Temple, into God's presence, for his blessing, something about which you need to hear a word of wisdom and confirmation.

It's worth a few minutes reflection on what our faith means to us and I can think of few better ways to reflect than with those wonderful words of the Nunc Dimittis so I'd like you all to turn to the Nunc Dimittis in the Book of Common Prayer that you were given when you came in. Just take a few moments to reflect on Simeon's song whilst we listen to Thomas Tallis's wonderful plainsong setting of the original latin 'Nunc Dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace'

**Tom Crotty**

