

Sermon for Sunday 28 January 2024 – The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas)

Pete Postle, Reader

Malachi 3.1-5; Psalm 24.7-10; Hebrews 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-40

May all I say and think, be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

On February 2nd, 40 days after Christmas, we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. That's the festival we call Candlemas.

There were, maybe still are, a total of three ceremonies attached to the birth of a Jewish child. The first ceremony would have been carried out in the temple when Jesus was just a week old. That's New Year's Day in our calendar. And in that ceremony, Jesus would have been given the name that he would carry through life. It's probably he would have been given the Hebrew name Joshua, Yeshua, which means the Lord of salvation. Jesus is the Greek equivalent.

But Candlemas was concerned with the other two ceremonies that follow later. The first of these was the redemption rite for a firstborn child, carried out a month after birth or as soon as possible thereafter. Now, redemption means the payment of a fee or a ransom in order to retrieve something. You probably think of it as mortgages. In this case, it concerns the right of life for the child, and the redemption fee is ceremonially paid to God.

To find out why, you must look in Exodus chapters eleven and twelve, where you will find the story of how Moses, with the help of God, managed to get the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Ten plagues in all were needed to persuade the Pharaoh. The last of those involved the death of all firstborn children, by marking their gate-posts with the blood of a sacrificial lamb. The gate-post indicated that the angel of death should pass over their homes, and so only Egyptian children were killed. Hence, of course, the feast of the Passover.

By that ceremony, the first born child of Jewish parents was deemed holy to the Lord. That's a nice example of what holy really means, that is, set aside for God, belonging to God, and hence also the ceremonial payment of five shekels to redeem the child, to redeem our Jesus. The third ceremony concerned Mary, and this is where the purification bit comes in. Mary should have said, Mary's purification, and not their purification. Purification was a symbolic washing and offering of a sacrifice, obligatory after certain events that the law considered had made an Israelite unclean and not, therefore, able to go into the temple. In this case, of course, that uncleanliness is childbirth.

40 days then, after Jesus was born, and it would seem, therefore, that Mary has sensibly decided to combine the two ceremonies in one trip from home to Jerusalem, Mary had to go to the temple and offer up a sacrifice of a lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon as a sin offering. If you were a bit hard up, you could sacrifice two pigeons instead. Which is what we are told Mary. It was easy to get the pigeons; they

were on sale by merchants in the temple forecourts; probably some of those merchants that later made Jesus see red. Not surprising, is it? Mary had to find 20 days wages and the price of two pigeons to stay true to her religion.

So far I've been talking about why Mary and Jesus have gone to the temple. But Candlemas is about what happens there. We are introduced to an old man named Simeon, who is looking forward, we are told, to the consolation of Israel; and to Anna, who seeks the same thing, but she calls it the redemption of Jerusalem. Simeon and Anna are referring to the fact that Israelites thought that they were still paying for the nation's past misdemeanours, and they waited the time when a Messiah would come to redeem them in the eyes of God.

Where's that idea come from? Isaiah. The full story really means reading Isaiah, chapter 40 all the way through to 53. But a couple of verses of chapter 40 are an introduction and will serve our purpose here - 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid'. So this end of sentence is the consolation of Israel, and Simeon has been promised by God that he'll see the Messiah who will bring that redemption. And so he does, in the form of the little infant Jesus.

Simeon's experience is recorded as a song, a song of praise and joy, which we know as Nunc Dimittis and sing at Evensong. In it, Simeon twice refers to that section of Isaiah. Isaiah, when he talks of 'His eyes have seen your salvation', he is thinking of chapter 52 of Isaiah. And 'for the glory of your people, Israel', he is reading from chapter 45 and 46. But most importantly for us is his description of Jesus as a 'light for revelation to the Gentiles', 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'. Now, you might, or might not, like to know that what is here translated as 'the Gentiles' is elsewhere, particularly in the Old Testament, translated as 'the heathen' or 'the nations', meaning, of course, other nations, not the Israelites.

To the Israelites, the heathen Gentiles, other nations, were those who did not know their God. The words and works of Jesus have helped us Christians to understand, to get nearer to, and to better carry out the wishes of that God, the same God of Israel. Jesus, quite simply, has provided just that light that we heathens need. Why, though, candles? Because for each of us, the light of God that we can see is best thought of as just the modest but reassuring light of a candle. We cannot yet see the whole blinding light, the complete knowledge of God. I don't think any of us humans could handle that experience.

I'm going to finish with some quotes from each of the three Abrahamic faiths to make the point. Psalm 18 - 'For thou will light my candle; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness'. The Quran - 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp in glass, and the glass like a brilliant star lit, from a blessed tree. An olive neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would almost give light even though no fire touched it. Light upon light, God guides to his light whomsoever he wills.' Or how about a Roman Catholic writing from Thomas à Kempis - 'O everlasting light, surpassing all created luminaries, flash forth thy lightning from above, piercing all of the most inward parts of my heart; and of course from Jesus himself - 'Let your light shine before mankind. They may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' Amen.