

## St Mary's. Candlemas. 3rd Feb 2019

### Prayer

"Down with the rosemary, and so: Down with the bays and mistletoe;  
Down with the holly, ivy, all, Wherewith ye dress'd the Christmas Hall"

Thus says the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Robert Herrick, in his poem called:

*"Ceremony upon Candlemas Eve"*

Nowadays most of us in the UK take our Christmas decorations down on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany. But, today is the day which actually marks the end of the great 40-day period of celebration of Christ's birth. Candlemas. Or, as it is now longwindedly known in the Western church: 'The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple'. In the Eastern Church it is often called: 'The Meeting', reminding us of the meeting between Simeon & Anna and the infant Jesus. And such is its importance that we celebrate it every single day (except, paradoxically, today), at evensong, when we say or sing the 'Nunc Dimittis', in which Simeon proclaims that this child will be 'a light for revelation to the nations' – a light shining on all people, not just the people of Israel.

And that is why it was called Candlemas, a festival of light, when people brought their candles for the coming year to church, to be blessed by the priest, so that the candles in their homes would not just be light to see by, but would remind them of the light of Christ.

Candlemas. It is an amazing story.

Mary & Joseph have gone up to the Temple with a dual purpose.

They have gone to seek purification for Mary after childbirth, something required by Jewish law. And, also, gone to make an offering for their firstborn son - in their case 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons' – which is how we know they were poor, because this is what the law allowed for those who couldn't afford a lamb.

The Temple in Jerusalem was full of people, pretty much all the time. Tourists coming to admire the spectacular building. Pilgrims & regular worshippers, coming to offer sacrifice, to give thanks, to seek God's guidance, to ask forgiveness or pray for healing. Officials, keeping the building in good order, coordinating the worship, selling the animals needed for sacrifice, and, no doubt, selling souvenirs as well. A real hive of activity. And in the midst of it all, a young couple, dressed in work people's clothes, northerners to boot, wander in with their baby, feeling unsure of themselves and out of place in such a magnificent setting. Probably like a lot of the people who wander into St Mary's, week by week, unused to being in a church.

Mary & Joseph, pushing their way through the crowds, bumping into worshippers, pilgrims, tourists, people selling stuff. And all this crowd, if they notice anything at all, see, simply, a couple with a baby, looking a bit lost.

Except for two *old* people. An elderly man, called Simeon, and a frail widow, called Anna. They are constantly looking, intently, longing, hoping, expecting. And they alone see: the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Saviour of the world, the Son, of the Living God, cradled in his mother's arms.

Now I think it would be fair to say that most of you here, the choir & musicians excepted, are not in the first flush of youth. Many of you, or should I say, many of us, are probably, for the sake of argument, around Simeon or Anna's age. As my daughter said about me recently: 'Why is it dad that when you sit down you go: 'Aghhh' and when you stand up you go: 'Owwhhh'. Coping with creaking knees or painful hips. Maybe wondering how long we should carry on driving. Perhaps worrying about how we will manage on our own, but not wanting to be a burden on anyone. Maybe feeling - in a society that tends to value us according to what we can *do*, rather than who we *are* - that we're not *worth* much, these days. A feeling not helped by *news items* about how the over 65's are a terrible drain on the NHS & how the cost of care for the elderly is unsustainable. So, here we are, determined not to end up in a nursing home. Yet knowing, in the back of our minds, that the Stannah lift alone, might *not* be enough to save us from that unwanted fate. Growing old - and feeling it.

But what these two *elderly* people, Simeon & Anna, have, which many of *us* also have, and many younger people do not have: is time. And Simeon and Anna have invested that time. Invested it very wisely indeed.

Time to think and to pray. Time to be quiet and still.

Time to read and to reflect. Time to spend in God's house

Time to be with people. Time to stop and to talk.

Time to listen and to notice.

Time to love and to be loved.

As the Australian cartoonist & writer of prayers, Michael Leunig, correctly observed: 'Nothing can be loved at speed.'

Simeon has been patiently waiting, hoping and praying for a very long time indeed. And, when, one day, out of the blue, he suddenly sees this child, he is stopped in his tracks. He goes up to the couple. He speaks with them. And then, he takes their baby in his arms, and, to the parents utter astonishment, sings the Nunc Dimittis.

'Lord, now you can let your servant die in peace, according to your promise. For my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples. A light to reveal you to the nations, and to be the glory of your people, Israel.'

And then, just as Mary and Joseph's hearts begin to burst with joy, he utters, with love and compassion, these bitter words of warning: 'And a sword shall pierce your own soul also.'

And then along comes Anna, a woman of great age – 84 – not so old these days but a very old woman indeed in those days. And she, too, praises God for what she has seen.

It is not that no one else saw him. Hundreds of people – maybe thousands – saw him. But only two people *recognized* him. Only two people were so attentive, so in tune with God, that they saw, not just a baby boy, but saw: the Wonderful Counsellor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the

Prince of Peace. They saw 'Emmanuel', God with us, wrapped in a blanket, and cradled in his mother's arms.

You may have seen a news item last week about waxwings spotted in Sherwood. I live in Sherwood. I may well have seen a waxwing. But my problem is (a) I wasn't on the lookout for waxwings and (b) I wouldn't have recognized one even if I had spotted it!

Thousands saw this young couple, wandering around the Temple, but only two people recognized him. And, if I had been there, I am pretty sure I would have failed to recognize him, as well.

Waiting and watching in prayer, like Simeon & Anna, does not come easily or naturally to most of us. Certainly not to me. But it *can* be cultivated, - especially if we have time on our hands. Or even better, if we make the time. Like the righteous, devout Simeon, *looking for* the redemption of Israel. And the dedicated Anna, constantly in the temple, *devoted to* prayer and fasting. Elderly people, with failing faculties, but with their *spiritual* senses fine-tuned.

Simeon & Anna are not unique. I have met a fair few Simeons and Annas in my time. People like May Sadler, a single woman, who worked all her life on the production line at Cadburys. She lived in a rented two up, two down, across the road from our church. She never locked her door, through which a steady stream of people passed, to pour out their troubles, to be prayed for, or simply for a cuppa and a chat. When she died, in her late 80's, over 500 people attended her funeral. The vicar

described her as: 'A mighty prayer warrior'. And so she was. I expect you have met people like her too. Indeed, I suspect that a few of *you* are those people. But if that isn't you, it is still possible to become that sort of person, whether you are old or young. To *invest* the time in prayer, in listening, in mindfulness. Maybe spending more time just hanging around here, in this house of prayer, being attentive to those who come here. Seeing, instead of a group of loud teenagers, young people, unsure of themselves, maybe searching for something, they know not what. Instead of the aggressive man who reeks of alcohol, someone trying to drown the trauma of abuse or war. Instead of the smart looking woman who looks as if she has life completely sorted, someone who is profoundly unhappy inside.

I wonder what we might see if we really took the time to look intently? We might, even in the most unlikely places and in the most unlikely people, catch a glimpse of Christ. And, maybe, just maybe, they might catch a glimpse of Christ, in us.

Simeon looks, and, at last, he sees what he has longed for, all his life. Cradled in his mother's arms, the Messiah, the Consolation of Israel. And he sees too, this young woman, amazed at all that has happened to her, full of joy at the birth of her son. And he sees, in her, both the blessing of this unique, amazing child, and also the unbearable pain he knows she will suffer, as she watches, helplessly, her beloved son, suffer and die. 'And a sword will pierce your own soul also.'

On this patronal festival, we remember that amazing woman, after whom this church is named. This woman whom all generations will call 'Blessed'. We remember her willingness to say 'yes' to God, whatever the cost. We remember her bitter-sweet life: her joy. And her suffering. We remember this woman who always points us to Christ.

And we remember these two, elderly people, Simeon and Anna, who, in their old age, when they are well past it by all human standards, are watching and waiting, every day. Watching & waiting, hoping & praying, for a glimpse of the Redeemer. And the Redeemer, the Saviour of the World, who is still here among us, today, does not disappoint them.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.