

CANDLEMAS

And Simeon said:

*Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace according to your word.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared before the face of all people,
a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)*

This week we saw a step forward in the Christian Calendar. Up until the 2nd February all that the church does in liturgy looks back to Christmas. Now the focus turns forward to Easter. By long tradition Candlemas was the day when Christmas decorations were put away. And until a new law was introduced in 1991, Candlemas in Scotland was one of the Quarter Days when particularly farm servants were hired and fired, and leases concluded or begun.

And so it goes on – the songs, the legends, the stories and the traditions about Candlemas could fill a book. But nowadays in our part of the church it is especially a time to think about the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. So it draws to a close the childhood stories of Jesus.

In the Book of Exodus we read these instructions to the people of Israel.

you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstlings of your cattle that are males shall be the LORD's. Every firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and the first-born of cattle. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb; but all the first-born of my sons I redeem.'¹

So that's what is happening here. Mary and Joseph, true to the Law of Moses, are bringing their first born son to the Temple to redeem him. This is the הבן פדיון -the Pidyon Haben happens to this day. A first born son at 29 and a half days (plus the time required to assemble 10 Jewish males) is redeemed before a member of the priestly family so that he is not obliged to serve in the Temple – even although the Temple in Jerusalem is long gone. In the particular case of this baby Jesus, everything is done according to the Book. What makes it different is that when the family goes the Temple they are met by an old man called Simeon the Righteous.

I love these legends – so I'll share this one. According to a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church, Simeon had been one of the seventy-two translators of the Septuagint. The Septuagint was a translation of the Hebrew Scripture into Greek – and took place about 250 years before Christ. As Simeon hesitated over the translation of Isaiah 7:14 "Behold, a virgin

¹ Revised Standard Version of the Bible © 1952 – Churches of Christ in the USA

shall conceive...", and wondered how this was possible, or even that it might be mistake, an angel appeared to him and told him that the prophecy was correct as it was written, and that he would not die until he had seen its fulfilment with the Christ born of a Virgin. This would make him well over two hundred years old at the time of the meeting described in Luke, and therefore miraculously long-lived.

Well, it is a nice story. But what we do know is that the words of Simeon uttered on that fateful day when Jesus was presented in the Temple were going to become probably the second most uttered liturgical words in the history of the Church. *Nunc dimittis* – for example became especially adopted by Anglicans around the world to be used at every evening worship service. It is often spoken at funeral services, and it is a lovely piece of writing.

*Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace according to your word,
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared before the face of all people,
a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.*

There have been some of the most wonderful musical settings composed. If any of you are Aled Jones fans, I would recommend you listen to his rendition of the setting by Geoffrey Burgon.

The poetry of it all is overwhelming – certainly T S Eliot found it such as he put these words into the mouth of Simeon the Righteous: -

*Grant us thy peace.
I have walked many years in this city,
Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,
Have taken and given honour and ease.
There went never any rejected from my door.
Who shall remember my house, where shall live my children's children
When the time of sorrow is come?
They will take to the goat's path, and the fox's home,
Fleeing from the foreign faces and the foreign swords.
Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation
Grant us thy peace.
Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
Now at this birth season of decease,
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow. ²*

The theme that persists for us is that even in the fading eyesight of this very old man the light that was in Jesus showed him hope and promise for the people. And he rejoiced, perhaps a little wearily, perhaps with a little resignation – but he was a very old man.

Light and darkness, darkness and light. These are the modes in which we can determine our experience of the world. Each one of us can feel ourselves to be in light and darkness – often

² A Song for Simeon – T S Eliot 1928

several times in the same day. Certainly each one of us can know spells in our lives when darkness threatens to engulf us.

The people in the Temple in Jerusalem on that day certainly could recognise that feeling. A people in poverty, the oppression of the occupying Roman army, sick and mad King Herod. Religious fanatics who increased in number all the time. People rushed after each new one, only to be disappointed.

This was a time when deep darkness covered the people. For us it can be the deep despair over the ongoing bitter struggle against terrorism, the deep suspicions between Christians and Muslims, the deaths in theatres of war. It can be the debilitating worry about the collapse of the economy – and the fact that each one of us feels threatened by the thought of having less of the world's goods than we anticipated. It can be the close and personal darkness that goes with fear, depression, illness or loss.

These can be deep darkneses indeed.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world." And he also said, "You are the light of the world." And that is what it means to be a Christian. "Christ is the Light of the world." "You are the light of the world" sums up our reason for being – that we are to reflect the light which is in Jesus.

Remember back to the moment at midnight on Christmas Eve when we stood and heard: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*³

This is the light that shines in the darkness of Iraq and Afghanistan, in the darkness of those who slept last night in the Old Town alleys of Edinburgh. This is the light that overcomes the darkness we create with our own hands. This is the light that can bring hope to our personal darkneses. This is the light that Simeon saw – saw, and rejoiced in, and knew that his wait was at an end.

And all of this happened with no great momentous things happening in that temple. The heavens didn't crack apart, no earthquake shook the pillars – but a very old man looked at a baby and believed. Into the darkness of this world had come the light of God. Nothing would ever be the same again.

"Thank God", said Simeon. "It is enough! Let me go now. Everything is in God's hands. God's light is come. It is enough".

And so it is!

AMEN

³ John 1:5