

THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE: CANDLEMAS

The 2nd February marks forty days after Christmas Day and by tradition is marked in the Church calendar as 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The name 'Candlemas', by which it is more commonly known, derived from the practice of a procession into a dark church where people carried lit candles singing the *Nunc Dimittis*. Candle-Mass is a very powerful and dramatic symbol of light conquering darkness and it brings the Christmas season to an end. At its heart Candlemas celebrates both the joy of Christ's coming into the world and his searching judgement as we look back to the day of his birth and forward to the coming days of his passion.

PSALM 24

- 1 The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it,
the compass of the world and all who dwell therein.
- 2 For he has founded it upon the seas
and set it firm upon the rivers of the deep.
- 3 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord,
or who can rise up in his holy place?'
- 4 'Those who have clean hands and a pure heart,
who have not lifted up their soul to an idol,
nor sworn an oath to a lie;
- 5 'They shall receive a blessing from the Lord,
a just reward from the God of their salvation.'
- 6 Such is the company of those who seek him,
of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob.
- 7 Lift up your heads, O gates;
be lifted up, you everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in.
- 8 'Who is the King of glory?'
'The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord who is mighty in battle.'
- 9 Lift up your heads, O gates;
be lifted up, you everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in.
- 10 'Who is this King of glory?'
'The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.'

1st READING

Malachi 3.1-5

God will judge the world, but not before he has given human beings the opportunity to learn from him at first hand.

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. So I will come near to you for judgement. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

2nd READING

Hebrews 2.14-18

Jesus lived a human life, and fully understands the temptations we all share. He frees us from slavery to sin and death, and restores our relationship with God.

Since the children brought to glory by God have flesh and blood, Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

THE GOSPEL.

Luke 2.22-40

The Holy Spirit reveals to Simeon and Anna that Jesus is the salvation of God's people. But there will be opposition and pain before God's will is finally done.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons". Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to

their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

“The Holy Spirit rested on him.” (Luke 2:25)

You may be familiar with the hymn “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”, with its lovely, lilting tune – but what you may not know is that it’s taken from a longer poem called “The Brewing of Soma” which was written by the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier.

*The faggots blazed, the caldron’s smoke
Up through the green wood curled;
“Bring honey from the hollow oak,
Bring milky sap,” the brewers spoke,
In the childhood of the world.*

*And brewed they well or brewed they ill,
The priests thrust in their rods,
First tasted, and then drank their fill,
And shouted, with one voice and will,
“Behold the drink of gods!”*

The first half of the poem is in stark contrast with the later, better-known verses. It evokes the powerful image of a group of Druid priests taking part in a primeval ritual. Gathered around a blazing fire and smoking cauldron, they concoct and knock back a potent hallucinatory drink, which is extracted from plant stalks. As the potion takes hold they become rejuvenated and revived until they’re in a state of “drunken joy”, wildly praising the gods, believing they’re experiencing divinity.

As a Quaker, Whittier believed in simple worship, and wrote his poem to show how drinking soma produced what he called “fever of the blood and brain”, rather than a real experience of God. His point was directed at the Church, where he maintained that some Christians had become intoxicated by a heady mix of euphoria and rapture in worship, and that “music, incense, vigils, and trance”, created a false sense of divinity, as soma did for the priests.

As far as we know, the Holy Family’s visit to Jerusalem did not coincide with any of the major festivals; times when Jerusalem became a heaving mass of people to rival any modern carnival or football crowd. But even on an ordinary day the Temple would have been an extremely busy place – with families presenting their firstborn, and women undergoing ritual purification. In this hectic environment we can imagine that the atmosphere would have been a far cry from the stillness of a Quaker meeting. At the same time it was a place of structured worship – a far cry from the Druid priests’ drug-fuelled frenzy.

Amid all the hustle and bustle, Mary, Joseph and Jesus would have looked like another ordinary family going about their business, and Jesus would have looked like another ordinary baby boy. And yet, through all the busy throng, Simeon and Anna both spotted something extraordinary. They clearly saw something – or rather, someone – who would change everything, for everyone, for ever.

It’s ironic that Whittier’s poem is nowadays often sung in hymn form at the kinds of services he might not have entirely approved of. But whether we go for reflection, ritual or rapture, what really matters is that our worship enables us to speak and listen to God. Because however, wherever and whenever we worship, and even if we don’t worship at all, our

fundamental human yearning is to be in communication with God – just as Simeon and Anna were.

Being in communication with God was something that the Quaker, Whittier found not only natural, but he also found plenty of time to do it. However, in the hurly-burly of modern daily life it is often far more difficult to find the space and the time. Just how do we as 21st century Christians move forward in our faith. Well, I think that the first step is to accept that God speaks to us all – all the time. The second step is to soften our souls so we are receptive. Rowan Williams makes the point clear when he says: “To accept God that’s the tricky part, because in the growing-up process we become hardened. As children we race headlong into adventure, only to suffer scraped knees. As teenagers we rush headstrong into romance, only to suffer broken hearts. So through life we become more cautious, and in the process most of us lose the adventurer and romantic within us – but it takes elements of both of these to listen to the voice of God”.

Of course we learn from our mistakes for a reason – that the tree was dangerous to climb, and that particular teenage romance was downright foolish. So how can we reverse the hardening process without getting carried away by every crazy delusion or wild hallucination? Simeon and Anna’s example is to make time for worship and devotion. That doesn’t mean we have to make the church our home, as Anna did, or even that we necessarily have to give up more time. But it does mean that, when we’re praying, we’re totally focused on prayer, and when we’re worshipping, that’s all we’re doing.

Nobody can tell anybody what God’s voice sounds like, or how God speaks to people. But the last verse of Whittier’s poem, which is actually based on that extraordinary passage in 1 Kings 19:11-13, where Elijah is searching for God, is a wonderful image:

The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Close your eyes and imagine that it describes the experience that Simeon and Anna had in the crowded Temple that day:

*“Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!”*

COLLECT PRAYER

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty, whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple, in substance of our flesh: grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts, by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.