

Candlemas 2019

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 2:22-40

Candlemas is above all the feast of light. In medieval England, before the Reformation made English religion arguably more Scriptural and certainly more boring, the parish churches would have been ablaze with light this day. You would have come in procession with candles to burn before an icon of the Virgin, and you would go home with candles blessed to ward off evil spirits, to protect you during thunderstorms, and to place in the hands of dying. You would have heard the words of Simeon, who saw that the infant Christ was to be a light to lighten the Gentiles; and you would go home carrying that Christ-light in your candle. The gloom and shadow of death, the freezing darkness of a medieval February, were brightened and warmed by the fires of Candlemas.

We live with central heating, electric lights, and a scientific culture. It is not surprising that the feast has lost some of its punch, although perhaps it is still sad, a matter of mourning that some of the richness of the old liturgy is simply no longer available to us. We still know something of the symbolic power of candles. At baptisms, the godparents are given one; at funerals, they stand around the coffin; at the Eucharist here this morning, they burn even though we do not need them to see by. We have them because they are beautiful, we have them also because at some inarticulate level they still speak of light, hope, purity, of witness being borne to some holy presence. You may bet that in all sorts of churches this morning, sermons will be being preached about candles and words like warmth, hope, and light will feature largely.

One of the good things about the Reformation, though, was that it reminded people not to get carried away with the symbolism and traditions that grew up around a feast, and that they should actually go back and read the Bible passages the feast celebrated. And if you read the story of Candlemas, of Mary and Joseph's visit to the Temple with the infant Christ, you notice two striking things. First, not a single mention of a candle anywhere. Secondly – and this is the key point this morning – light is doing something rather different here. It is not just being warm, and comforting, and hopeful. Simeon is described as waiting for the consolation of Israel, and there is no doubt that he receives this, but listen to what he goes on to say to Mary about her son, the Light: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Light, in other words, is ambivalent. It is beautiful, it warms, it gives hope, yes; but here it also searches out, penetrates, and judges. It is something to be yearned after, and yet something which when it comes you would perhaps rather not have. Remember those words of the

prophet Malachi: 'the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?' Because when the promised one comes, when light appears, it will show us things that have been hidden and perhaps those are things we would rather not see. To see ourselves, perhaps, as we truly are - without favourable spin, without the excuse of context, in perfectly clear and unrelenting light – this is not necessarily Gospel. Rowan Williams puts it perhaps at its most stark: “sooner or later, we must all drive into the extermination camp and confront without illusion the most unbearable truth about what it is to be human, the truth that benevolence and rationality are not at the heart of peoples actions. There is a 'horror of great darkness' in our dealings with each other.”¹

A horror of great darkness. I seem to have achieved the remarkable feat of in a few minutes turning a sermon about light and candles into one about horror and darkness. You could say it is the Ulsterman in me. Or, you could say that it is yet another example of the genius of the church year. Because just as we celebrate Candlemas, Lent begins to hove into view – a mere matter of weeks away now. So our thoughts should be turning to how we spend that season.

And one good way to think about it is that it could be a time of coming to see ourselves more clearly, of taking sober stock of who we are: not flagellating ourselves, not becoming neurotic about sin, but simply having the courage to face our true selves. On Ash Wednesday, we will be signed with ash, and we will hear those sober words: 'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return; turn from sin and be faithful to Christ.' Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return; those words are good medicine for the soul. They puncture fantasy about ourselves, they make us humble – and that is when the light of Christ might start to do us good, and not just make us away in fear.

So how might he do us good? What, after all, do we mean when we call him 'light of the world'? How is he light to me? There are probably lots of ways that I haven't even begun to grasp yet – that is what Lent is for, after all – but here are a couple of ways that seem to make sense to me. He is light, because in his life I see what my life could be if it was stripped of all fear, all selfishness, all laziness: if it was made pure love. I see what it is to truly give yourself away for others, and something within me recognises joyfully that that is what it is to be truly human, to be made in the image of God. He is light because he reveals where I am not, where I am darkness and unlove. And he is Light, because as I draw near to him in prayer and sacrament and church he begins to burn away my darkness. Bit by bit, the unlove is exposed, judged, burnt and changed; bit by bit, I become light like he is. And as I do, the world does. That process of exposure and transformation, of stripping and conversion, is what prayer is all about.

So, turning our eyes to Lent: the question is, what are we to do? What are we to do that will

1 Open to Judgement, p.89.

help this process of drawing near to Christ, of being exposed to the searching light which welcomes, certainly, but which also judges and changes? What used to be called fasting certainly has its place: I'm not against giving up chocolate or wine or whatever it happens to be. But the key thing, surely, is prayer: the discipline, every day, of placing yourself before Jesus and simply saying something like, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.' Those are the words of the Jesus Prayer, an ancient prayer which many, many Christians, pray over and over again every day. As the words sink in, so does the reality: what we are doing is taking our little bit of darkness and immersing it in the sea of light which is Christ, and gradually, gradually, the light shines even in the darkness. You will find your own ways to pray. I would like to help you, if I can, and you know you can always speak to me privately about these things. But whatever you do, this is the one thing needful: every day, take your little bit of darkness and drown it in Christ's light. That is an agenda not just for Candlemas, not just for Lent, but for the whole of Christian life.