



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

2 February 2020: Choral Matins

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Exodus 13:1–16, Romans 12:1–5

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean

Today is Candlemas, and it is interesting that in our readings, we get the essential background tones and colour to what follows later in the Eucharistic readings: namely, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, with Anna and Simeon attending. Tonight I am preaching on this at Evensong, so what I want to spend some time on this morning is the reason why consecration of the first-born – or, if you prefer, our own bodies and lives, matters today. Our New Testament reading echoes this too. Paul exhorts us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. It is a rather counter-cultural demand. Are not our bodies our own? The Christian faith says ‘no’. They are temples of the Holy Spirit, and so vessels of service for God and for God’s purposes in the world.

In our Age of Anxiety, the very idea that our being belongs to someone other than ourselves may seem perplexing. But Candlemas is a reminder that we are all set aside by God for some real purpose. Moreover, we are asked to embrace and follow God’s purpose with an eagerness and commitment in this. We are not asked to weigh our options and bargain or negotiate with God. The demands of discipleship can sometimes mean immediate springing into action. At other times, it is about faithful patience – and lengthy waiting. Sometimes, it is about gruelling and demanding faith, with no obvious sense of what may come. But the promise is the same to us all: the light of the world will come.

What can this mean? Candlemas is an amazing festival. Originating back as far as the 5th century, it was the feast for blessing the candles of church, as well as commemorating the encounter of Joseph, Mary and Jesus with Simeon and Anna. It is the last childhood ‘snapshot’ that we have of Jesus. The next time we meet him in the gospels is in the same place: in the Temple as an Adolescent, confounding teachers, scholars and scribes, and then not again until adulthood.

But let us focus on Anna and Simeon, for they have both waited; kept their counsel, waited, and waited, and waited...I like their part in this aspect of the Candlemas story, for waiting is what many of us must do. But there is an important distinction I must make here for would-be disciples: that between waiting and dithering; of being patient and of being delayed. Let me say more.

Many countries have folk tales that rewrite the Christmas story in the vernacular. One of my favourites is Baboushka, a Russian folk tale. In this story, the Wise Men call on Baboushka, a toy maker, who is busy making toys for selling. They invite Baboushka along to offer a toy to the Christ child, but she says she is too busy, and sends them on their way.

Later she regrets this, and decides to try and find the infant king on her own... but she is too late. The Wise Men and the Holy Family have moved on; the legend says that down the ages, you can hear Baboushka calling out for the Christ Child, scouring the land, looking for Jesus to give him her gift. The message is clear; don't delay – hurry to the crib.

But Anna and Simeon have not rushed. Good things also come to those who wait. And isn't this the point of Candlemas? Part of the genius of the Christmas narrative is to make us journey to see Jesus – we need to go looking for him; seek him out; make an effort. But the gospel also tells it another way. To those who cannot move like Simeon and Anna, Jesus will come. Later in the life of Jesus, he will meet seekers; but Jesus will also seek the curious, lost and ignorant, and those who'd never thought of looking. He is here for us all. The light of the world is for the world – all of it – not just the enlightened.

This has been a momentous week in politics and history. We have seen the sombre commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. A reminder of dark days in Europe. Two days ago, we began the process of leaving the European Union. I make no political comment here, save that we need to be hopeful and reflective. Europe is not at war now. Nor are we. Our divisions as a nation – over politics and the European Union – have to be seen in perspective. We have not, as nation, descended into a version of any Spanish or Syrian civil war.

We have to see our current situation in a different light. We are all citizens of the world and have a shared humanity. We are human first, and only Dutch or Latvian second. We face common problems as the peoples of Europe – climate change and global warming, healthcare and viruses, large corporations not paying enough tax, migration and asylum

issues, and more besides. No matter how we configure our politics going forward in Europe, we remain part of a continent with shared issues, and more common values than there are major differences.

On Tuesday I was present at the consecration of Martin Gorick, our former Archdeacon – now Bishop of Dudley. He was consecrated as a bishop. But in truth, we are all called to be consecrated. We are pilgrims in an uncertain world, and dedicating and consecrating ourselves to God's purpose is part of what keeps the light of Christ burning for others, and maintains hope for this nation, and for the wider world. We can face many trials and tribulations. Even forms of persecution, and many hostilities from the conscious and unconscious defences and attacks of others. But we walk forward in hope, consecrated to God.

The psychoanalyst Karl Jung recorded a dream, where he was sheltering a little light in his hands and at his back was the fierce Brocken, which was a towering wind threatening to blow it out. He had to keep walking forward, concentrating on that small flame in his hands. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he writes:

‘About this time I had a dream which both frightened and encouraged me. It was night in some unknown place, and I was making slow and painful headway against a mighty wind. Dense fog was flying along everywhere. I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment. Everything depended on my keeping this little light alive. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was coming up behind me. I looked back and saw a gigantic black figure following me. But at that same moment I was conscious, in spite of my terror, that I must keep my little light going through night and wind, regardless of all dangers.’

He goes on:

‘The storm is time, ceaselessly flowing into the past, which just as ceaselessly dogs our heels. It exerts a mighty suction which greedily draws everything living into itself; we can only escape from it – for a while – by pressing forward’.

So, we press forward. Be consecrated anew. Jesus has been brought to the temple to be consecrated as a first born male as the custom demands. But as with all such customs, the blessings flow both ways. Simeon and Anna are blessed as much as the one they came to bless.

Strangely, it is here, in this temple, that Jesus begins his ministry. For here he is truly recognised as a light for both Israel and the world, and set apart by those two faithful witnesses who have waited for him. The road to Calvary begins here: yet in darkness, this light shines. So, at Candlemas, consecrate yourselves afresh to God, and present yourself to God as a living sacrifice, wholly and acceptable to the One who made you and called you. In so doing, may God bless you with gracious, radiant beaming light and love this Candlemas - and shine upon you. Amen.