

THE FEAST OF CANDLEMASS

Malachi 3. 1-5
 Hebrews 2. 14-18
 Luke 2. 22-40

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
 Amen.

This great and beautiful feast of Candlemass points us both backwards and forwards in the Church's year. It points us backwards to Christmas and forward to the season of Lent and Easter, which will so soon come upon us.

Backward to Christmas, because this Feast marks the end of the Christmas season. Forty days after the birth of Jesus, the time for purification¹ had come: according to Jewish Law, if the child was a boy, the mother could return to the Temple for purification forty days after his birth.

But the parents of Jesus also came to the Temple in Jerusalem for a second reason, to present their baby to the Lord. This too was a requirement of the Law of Moses² which St Luke quotes in verse 23: 'Every first-born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.' This consecration of the first-born male is a practice that started after the last plague that God brought upon Egypt, when all of Egypt's first-born were slain, whilst the first-born of the Israelites lived. Ever since that day of deliverance, the Israelites had consecrated their first-born sons to God, because they belonged to him.

Yet after the Levites and the priests took the place of the first-born males in service to the Lord,³ the parents had to pay a set price to the priests to 'redeem'⁴ or 'buy

¹ Cf. Lev 12. 1-8.

² Cf. Ex 13. 2 and Num 8. 15-17.

³ Cf. Num 3. 12, 45; 8. 14.

⁴ Cf. Ex 34. 20.

back' their first-born sons at the time of their presentation. This presentation of the first-born sons never occurred earlier than a month after their birth; and therefore the presentation of the child and the purification of the mother of the child could be done at the same visit to the Temple.

St Luke does not tell us, as we might have expected, that priests received the baby Jesus in the Temple. Rather it is two old people, Simeon and Anna, who receive this child and recognise that he is not only the one whom they had longed for, but the one whom all Israel had looked for. This baby was the Messiah, the Christ.

Simeon, righteous and devout, was looking forward to the consolation of Israel,⁵ the peace of Israel, and perhaps to freedom from the Roman yoke. The Holy Spirit had assured him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Now this same Spirit led Simeon into the Temple. He took the baby Jesus into his arms and uttered what have become the familiar words of the *Nunc Dimittis*, recited every day at Evensong since the English Reformation, and before that, by Benedictine monks at Compline before retiring at the end of the day.

'Master, you are now dismissing⁶ your servant in peace: according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation,⁷ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles⁸ and for glory to your people Israel.'⁹

Three ideas emerge as we hear this great song. Firstly, God has prepared this moment; he has designed it and brought everything together. This offering of Jesus,

⁵ In the original Greek text, the word for consolation is *paraklesis*. Jesus is the one who comforts, the one who encourages, the one who supports, the one who refreshes.

⁶ The word 'dismiss' is a military word, used to describe a sentinel who has stood watch during the long hours of the night. As the sun comes up over the eastern horizon, he knows that his work is finished, and he goes to his commanding officer to be dismissed.

⁷ In Hebrew, Jesus' name means 'Yahweh saves'. In the opening chapters of St Luke's gospel, the term 'salvation' has two connotations. In the Old Testament texts quoted, it refers to the physical deliverance of Israel; and in light of the gospel, it refers to spiritual salvation which is brought through faith in our Lord's person and work.

⁸ Cf. Isa 42. 6, 49. 6.

⁹ Cf. Isa 46. 13; Zech 1. 71-75.

this presentation in the Temple, recognises that from the beginning, God has planned the restoration of his people and their salvation.

Secondly, this salvation is for all people; our Lord is a light for revelation to the Gentiles. We are, most of us, among the Gentiles to whom this revelation (or this light) has come. And today we bear candles in recognition that the light of Christ has shone *upon us*; and by his grace, *in us* and *through us*.

Thirdly, this song also reflects back on God's ancient people: the people whom he has cherished as his own from the earliest days; the people who by their recognition of God and their obedience to him have made all this possible. As this song reflects back on God's ancient people, it reflects back not just on the priests; but also on the ordinary people who have longed for God and for his glory to his people Israel.

We now see that this song of Simeon also provides a glorious parallel to three key ideas that are given in St Matthew's and St Luke's narratives of the birth of Christ. The first idea given in the nativity accounts is that God prepared and planned the moment of the birth of his Son. The second idea is that even Gentiles (as exemplified by the Wise Men at Epiphany) would be given access to this important event. And the third idea is that the simple and religious fold of God's community, exemplified by the rough shepherds who were the first worshippers of the baby Jesus, would also be given access to our Lord. Yes, at Candlemass we look backward today to the story of Christmas and complete its wonderful narrative.

But is that all we celebrate today? No, we are also on the cusp between the two great focal points of the Church's year. Having celebrated Christmas, we look forward through Lent to the solemnity and wonder of Holy Week and Easter. To grasp the connection between the Feast of Candlemass and the momentous events of the Passion in Holy Week and Easter, we need to think again about the principal purpose

for which our Lord's parents brought him to the Temple. As we have seen, it was to redeem him, and to sacrifice to the Lord 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

It is Anna, the old widow in St Luke's account, who points to Christ's role in the story of redemption. We are told that Anna praised God and spoke about the child to all who were looking for the *redemption* of Jerusalem. I wonder, did St Luke perhaps see the irony of the forty day-old Jesus (who is the Christ and the only true Redeemer of the world) being brought to the Temple, so that he could be 'redeemed' through the blood of the sacrifice of two small birds?

St Luke knows – and we too believe – that redemption cannot come from the sacrifice of bulls or goats, or of turtle-doves or young pigeons. Redemption comes only from the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah, the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, the 'one oblation of himself once offered', 'the full, perfect and sufficient, sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.' This is what we will celebrate afresh during Holy Week and at Easter.

In the meantime, as we look at the candles that we hold in our hands, representing the light of Christ shining in the dark places of the world, we recall our own responsibility to be with Christ; and our ability in the power of the Holy Spirit to be both lights and redemption for the world.

That we can be, if we live in Christ and walk faithfully with him. As we come today to the Holy Eucharist, to the bread and wine which are his Body and Blood, so we come to be renewed and uplifted, to be strengthened and restored in him, so that *in him* we too can shine as a light to the world.

Amen.