

“Now when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.”

One of the annoying things about life is that it produces dirty linen. Put a clean shirt or blouse on in the morning and by the evening the collar and cuffs will be soiled, and it's worse if you live in London. Living makes things dirty.

The same can be said of many aspects of life. Friendships can lose their freshness; ideals become compromised; standards of behavior lowered. So a major theme of Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus, or the Purification of the BVM is cleaning.

There was a soap manufacturer, an unbeliever, walking along the road with a minister. The manufacturer said: “The gospel you preach has not done much good, for there is still a lot of wickedness in the world, and wicked people, too.” The Minister made no reply until they passed a dirty young child making mud pies by the roadside. The Minister turned to the manufacturer and said: “Soap has not done much good in the world, I see; for there is still much dirt and plenty of dirty people about.” “Oh, well,” said the manufacturer, “the soap is only useful when it is applied.” “Exactly!” replied the minister. “So it is with the gospel we proclaim.”

It is when people begin to realise their alienation from God and from each other that they can seek repentance and forgiveness as the old life is washed away and they can walk afresh with God to guide them. And cleansing is what we all need even though we walk with God, for it is only in his strength that we shall be able to overcome the faults which so often mar our witness.

Has it ever struck you that this festival strikes an odd note in the gospel story, as it has to do with organized religion? Many people today, and especially the so-called ‘intelligentsia’, or chattering classes, reject organised religion. Many make a distinction between ‘spirituality’, which is fine, and religion, especially the Christian Faith, which has too much givenness about it. Being spiritual means one can believe what one likes – it is utterly undemanding and self-serving.

Nicholas Lash has written: “When people say (as they do, it seems, with increasing frequency) that they are more interested in spirituality than religion, they usually seem to mean that they prefer the balm of private fantasy, the aromatherapy of uplifting sentiment, to the hard work of thought and action, the common struggle to make sense of things, to redeem and heal the world.”

This account of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple underlies what was true for all of his life, his active involvement in the organized religion of his day, though on this occasion it was not his to choose. Throughout his childhood he was nurtured in the Jewish faith and this is the second theme of this festival.

Whether the majority reject or simply ignore the Christian faith the Church remains through the faithful, few as they may be, to guard the tradition, and to keep the truth about God in Christ alive. By its very existence, the Church counters the current belief that there can be a free-for-all in matters of faith; that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as it doesn't damage others. That was lies anarchy, and minds open to be led by any strong-minded agitator. “If you don't believe in something, you'll believe in anything!”. True religion demands commitment, self-discipline and the common effort to build up the community.

So Jesus in accordance with the Law is brought to the Temple, and Mary offers the prescribed sacrifice for her purification, and to present her firstborn to the Lord. And while the family is in the Temple, two extraordinary people accost them, Simeon and Anna. Both aged, both waiting for God's promised fulfillment in sending a Saviour, the Messiah, which they see fulfilled in this child. No wonder Simeon warns Mary of the turmoil that Jesus would bring, and the sadness it would mean for her.

There's a tremendous contrast between Jesus' upbringing and that of children today. There's been a move away from discipline and order in the bringing up of children. Free expression is approved of. Only on the radio earlier this month, a contributor said that a great deal of the trouble with children today is that families no longer sit down at the table and eat together, and as importantly, talk together. It is in this daily sharing together the highs and lows of each day that children can be helped to cope, and give gentle guidance.

Our whole attitude today to child rearing is at fault. Children have to be allowed to fail; they have to learn to cope with danger, not over protected. As all gardeners know, seedlings have to be hardened off before being planted out. This is true also for the life of faith. It's no good allowing children to make up their own minds – they haven't the information or experience to do so. If we are to grow young Christians there needs to be order and discipline for them when young.

Though Jesus was nurtured amidst the disciplines and constraints of organized religion, it didn't limit his thinking or inhibit his willingness to go beyond the accepted interpretation of God's word. What blinded the orthodox religious leaders of his day was not their faith but their worldliness, and their concern for their status, wealth and power. Remember, it was this same faith which inspired Simeon and Anna, and it nurtured Jesus all his life.

If the Church is to be faithful it must maintain its worship, and do all that it can to encourage others, especially the young. We shall only discover what it is that God is calling us to do in our present situation if we pray regularly and earnestly for his guidance, and then for courage to act.

And why is today called 'Candlemas'? Because people would go in procession with lighted candles to celebrate this day, the day Christ entered the very heart of the Jewish Faith, the Temple, as the one who was to fulfill the hopes and longings of the prophets. A candle is made up of two parts – the wax and the wick. One without the other is pretty useless; put the two together and it works perfectly. So it is with us. By ourselves we so often fail to achieve what we hoped for. Add the Holy Spirit of God and we come alive and are transformed.

There was an American teacher who took a job in a Japanese school. One of the conditions was that he was forbidden to mention anything about his Christian faith. He was true to his promise all the years he was contracted to teach there. But he did keep his own prayer life going, and sought to live a Christian life – being courteous, patient, always ready to listen to his students and give them time. By the time he was ready to leave, so impressed were they by the way he lived his life and gave himself to their well-being, that some 40 of his students met and agreed to become Christian, some 25 later going on to Bible College.

There was a miller who had to get to the post office, so went straight from work, his clothes covered in flour. As he edged his way through the people standing about inside, a small dusting of flour was left on everyone he touched. Do we leave our mark as Christians on others as well?