

MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION

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.

Dear friends, today we have a great privilege, that of celebrating Candlemass. The shimmering lights of our hand-held candles complement the beautiful architecture and art-work of this church; and the fine music that is being sung is a fitting accompaniment to the finely-wrought prose and poetry of our divine liturgy. Today, as on other great feast days in the life of the Church, all that we do, say and sing is highly symbolic, holy and prayerful. It is rich fare indeed for our souls.

And all of this is *right*; because light, glory, beauty and hope are central to this last celebration in Epiphany-tide, as we *recognise* the beauty of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and the light, glory and hope that flow from his wondrous Incarnation.

I use the word ‘recognise’ deliberately. An extraordinary aspect of our Gospel passage is that Simeon and Anna were both enabled to *recognise* this forty day-old infant, with his lowly parents, as the Lord’s Messiah. Somehow, by the mysterious prompting of the Holy Spirit, Simeon and Anna *recognised* him; they saw his face, and yet they saw so much more.

Take Simeon, for example. When he came into the temple, he realised that he had to watch no longer. He *recognised* the Anointed One, the one for whom he had been waiting. In a moment of prophetic joy, Simeon called the Christ-child ‘the salvation of God’, and ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to the people of Israel’. In visiting humankind through his Son our Lord, God did indeed bring real

salvation from evil and sin to those of us who need it. And this salvation was to come both as 'light' and 'glory': a light for Gentiles, who would see in Christ's Incarnation a sure revelation of the grace and redemption of God; and 'glory' for the Jews, for whom Jesus's Incarnation was proof not only that 'salvation is of the Jews', but proof of God's glory full stop.

Yes, Simeon spoke of salvation, light and glory; but he also spoke of division, opposition and rejection. Simeon knew that not all humankind would receive the salvation that was being offered; he knew that not all would see the light of revelation or recognise the glory of God in the coming of our Lord. This one who would bring salvation would also bring judgement; this one who would be a cornerstone would also be a stumbling-stone for others. Many would reject the gospel and doubt and refuse its truth. And in a second prophetic oracle, Simeon spoke of a sword of sorrow that would pierce the very soul of Mary, the mother of Christ; she personally would share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel, in ways yet to be revealed. As Simeon speaks, it is as if the light and glory are seen within a canopy of enveloping darkness.

Or take Anna. When she *recognised* the Messiah, her reaction was one of praise and witness; but like Simeon, she also saw more. She spoke about the child to all who were looking for the 'redemption' of Jerusalem. This word 'redemption', introduced skilfully here by St Luke, has two meanings. The first meaning refers to what Mary and Joseph were doing in the temple that day: they had come to present their Son to the Lord. According to the Law of Moses,¹ every first-born male was to be presented, or given over to the Lord; but each Jewish family was authorised to dedicate their first-born son in a sacramental gesture by 'redeeming' it, that is, by making another lesser sacrifice (such as that of an animal) instead. Redemption

¹ Cf. Ex 13. 2, 13; Num 8. 15-17.

involves sacrifice. This is what Mary and Joseph came to do on the day of the presentation.²

Yet Anna's use of the word 'redemption' has a second meaning when we stop to consider that the One who was presented and redeemed in the temple would himself become the Sacrifice, the final Sacrifice, the fulfilment of all sacrifice and the one redeeming Sacrifice for the whole of humankind. More than that, the One who was presented in the temple would also become the Temple itself,³ the place where God meets with his people.

This is where the heart of our Candlemass celebration lies; for Candlemass is about our continuing to *recognise* Jesus for who he is.

Of course, we already recognise the Lord as he stands among us today, in his risen power and as he does every time the Church gathers in his name. And we recognise the Lord, do we not, in the scriptures, which are not merely ancient repositories of human wisdom, but the living word of Christ the Word made flesh. And thirdly, we recognise the Lord as we receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of redemption. As we partake of his body and blood offered for us and to us, we are sacramentally united with him. In this bread and in this cup, the presence of Christ is not only *with us*, but *in us* as we eat and drink.

² The sacrifice that was made by Mary and Joseph for the 'redemption' of Jesus is not specified (and nor is it specified in Ex 13). The sacrifice of a pair of 'turtle-doves or two young pigeons' (Lk 2. 24) refers rather to the offering brought by Mary and Joseph to the temple for her purification (cf. Lev 12. 1-8).

³ When Jesus cleansed the temple he predicted that the temple of his body would be raised up after three days (Jn 2. 19). Under the New Covenant our Lord has replaced the temple. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, the temple was the great meeting-place between a holy God and his sinful people. This was the place of sacrifice, the place of atonement for sin. But this side of the cross, where Christ by his sacrifice pays for our sin, Jesus himself becomes the great meeting-place between a holy God and his sinful people; thus he becomes the temple, the meeting-place between God and his people. It is not as if our Lord in his Incarnation serves as the temple of God. Christ says, 'Destroy this (physical, Jewish) temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' It is in Jesus's death, in his destruction, and in his resurrection three days later, that he meets our needs and reconciles us to God, becoming the temple, the supreme meeting-place between God and sinners.

In all of these manifestations, the presence of Christ in us and amongst us is all about salvation, light and glory, to use the words of Simeon. Because of the Incarnation, you and I have been given a second chance; we have been offered grace and forgiveness; we have been delivered from the effects of evil and sin.

And equally importantly, the presence of Christ in us and amongst us is also about sacrifice. It is only through our Lord's sacrifice of himself for us that we can claim to have true and lasting redemption.

As we bring our thoughts to a close, I wonder, how can we respond appropriately to the Feast of Candlemass?

One way to respond is to pray that through Christ and in Christ, we may present our own selves as a 'living sacrifice' (to use the words St Paul),⁴ holy and acceptable to God, which is one way of expressing our worship of him. We know that as we do this, we will be called upon to make choices, and that some of these choices will require an effort on our part.

Another way of responding to Candlemass is to consider the blessed, lit candles that have adorned this church and which we have carried today in our hands. These candles are nothing less than living symbols of Jesus, who is the Light. These outward candles complement the inner truth of our Holy Communion. As we carry these candles in procession, you and I are to become bearers of our Lord's light; and as we leave this church, you and I are called to continue to be bearers of Christ's light in the world. As we bear Christ's light in the world, we will confront its darkness.

As we turn from Christmas and Epiphany and look towards Lent, we turn from glory and light and faithfully resolve to walk the path of discipleship. We accept to

⁴ Cf. Rom 12. 1-2.

confront evil, and to work alongside our Lord in his on-going work of redemption which the Cross has achieved. In blowing out our candles today, we do so only symbolically, because the true light of Jesus' presence is within us, as we have received his Holy Spirit, and as we have partaken of his body and his blood.

Yes, our celebration of Candlemass this morning is extraordinarily beautiful; one could even say that it is a foretaste of heaven! But we must not let things stop there. To recognise Christ means to carry him, his light and his glory into the darkness, as living candles of his presence and saving love. And like Anna, we too must talk about him: to all those who long; and to each person who longs for redemption.

Amen.