

## LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

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.

In today's evocative, beautiful celebration in readings and music for the Feast of the Presentation (what we call Candlemass) we come to the end of the Christmas season.

Not literally, of course. We are well into the Epiphany season by now, and in fact only a stone's throw away from Ash Wednesday. Christmastide is long past, and these short, dark winter days seem to be all that is left of that festive season.

But the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple is the last of the events we know of that are part of the stories of Jesus's birth found in the gospel of Luke. Forty days after Christ's birth—after the shepherds and the angels, and after the ritual circumcision, marking our Lord as a member of the tribe of Israel—after all of that, Mary and Joseph come to Jerusalem to present their firstborn son to the Lord. Their intention is to consecrate him; to mark him as holy and set apart; to dedicate him to service of God. Into the Temple they come, a new mother and her husband, along with their new son.

And there in their faithful fulfilment of the Law, the Holy Family encounters Simeon and Anna, Old Testament-style prophets who seem to have somehow wandered out of their portion of the Bible and are found here in the early pages of the New Testament.

Simeon's reaction is recorded first. He was an old man, but God had promised him that he would not die until he had met the Messiah himself. There in the Temple,

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The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemass)  
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that promise was kept. Like the shepherds who had come before to Bethlehem, Simeon saw, with his own eyes, the person who is salvation, the one who came to redeem Israel, and to save the Gentiles. He saw in that same child the person who brings glory to Israel because, of all the peoples of the earth, our Lord shows that it is Israel that has been chosen to be the site of the new covenant. The incarnation of the Son of God as a son of Abraham is to the glory of Abraham's children.

He must not have looked like much, this person who is salvation and glory; this Messiah of Israel; this Christ of God; this Light of the world. One month-old babies do not look like much; they tend to still be kind of scrunched up, little bundles of perpetual need, quite devoid of the charms that come later when they can smile and coo and do other cute baby things. The Messiah wasn't much to look at, at that point. But there he was, and Simeon and Anna recognised him. Mary and Joseph were amazed.

Of course they were. Imagine them there. In the dim light of this grand, ancient, Temple, in which their ancestors had worshipped for half a millennium, they heard Simeon say that Jesus would be the light of the world, the whole world. The prophet Isaiah had promised centuries earlier that one day an Israelite would bring the entire world into relationship with God, bringing with him the light of truth, the light of love, the light of salvation, to a world that would otherwise walk in darkness. They were hearing, and we are hearing, that this Christ is the sign of the unity of all of God's people, for ever. This Feast of the Presentation is therefore the climax of the Christmas story, which speaks of the beginning of the salvation of the world; and the light that lightens all nations.

But Candlemass is not only the climax of the Christmas story. Simeon had more to say. To Mary, Simeon continued: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ... and a sword will pierce

your own soul too.’ The Gentiles would be enlightened by our Lord and Israel would be glorified, but Jesus is not only the sign of unity. He will be, and he is, a sign of division.

Division. Destined for the falling of many; a sign to be opposed; the piercing of a sword. Christ brings not only light, but darkness. Not only peace, but the sword. His birth brought not only life, but immediately our Lord became the cause of the death of others (I refer here to the massacre by Herod of the Holy Innocents, the young male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem); and eventually he would face death himself. Candlemass is not only the climax of Christmas; it is the first day that prefigures the Passion.

The light shines in the darkness, but, like this morning’s candles, it does not dispel the darkness forever (at least not yet). Even those of us who worship by candlelight today know that Jesus not only makes things brighter; there are also ways in which the spotless Lamb reveals the darkness of our own hearts, our sin, and all that within us that opposes Christ. We, too, are the ones who will fall before we rise; we, too, are the ones whose inner thoughts are revealed by the our Lord; we, too, are the ones whose dark hearts will be pierced by the sword of righteousness. Yes, we also are the ones of whom Simeon speaks. We are the ones who, as Jesus himself will be, must be plunged into the darkness of baptismal water, falling into death before we rise to newness of life.

Today is not the only day in the Church’s liturgical year when we worship by candlelight. You and I will have the opportunity to once again worship by flickering candlelight at the Easter Vigil. At the beginning of that most holy night, the Christ whom Simeon had recognised those decades before at the Presentation is dead, a crucified body lying in a tomb. But then, suddenly, at that most important moment in the Christian year, all of the lights in church come on in full intensity, and the

crucified Lord is proclaimed as the resurrected Christ. The Lord is risen indeed! In that moment, the darkness will be dispelled and the promise of eternal salvation ('the entrance into the land of light and joy', as the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it) will be illuminated by the one who is himself the Way. But there are miles to go between this moment in Jesus's life and that one.

Blessed Saint Luke. In telling the story of the birth of our Lord, his gospel gives us Christmas and Holy Week at the same time. The darkness and the light. The judgment and the salvation. The death and the life.

On this feast of Candlemass, may we and all of God's people join our voices with Simeon, echoing the praises of Anna, as we await the coming redemption of the world.

Amen.