

A LIGHT FOR ALL PEOPLE

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.

There would have been some excitement in the communities of our Christian ancestors on the Feast of Candlemas, the last great festival of the Christmas cycle before turning towards Lent. In a fifteenth-century parish, for instance, the day would have started with a rumbling stomach, as only bread and water would have been allowed the day before.

Preparations would quickly begin for one of the most elaborate processions of the liturgical year: a real celebration, when the churches (in the words of a Shropshire monk of the time) ‘made great melody’, and had done so since the seventh century. The procession was an enactment of the journey to Jerusalem by Mary and Joseph to present their child in the Temple, and large parish feasts were put on as part of the day’s festivities.

Candlemas falls at the start of the month that begins to drive away the darkness from our afternoons, and many of the prayers used throughout the day drew on this image of the retreating darkness. Every parishioner was obliged to carry a candle in procession, and offer it to the priest, along with a penny.

The candles were all blessed, sometimes on elaborate mechanical, chandelier-like constructions that would spin them around to enable the priest to bless each one. They then burned all through the day and night, in front of the image of Mary, as a sign of the parish’s devotion.

In the fourteenth century, an enormous row broke out in Friesthorpe, Lincolnshire between the Rector and his parishioners, because (after the parishioners had gone home) the Rector stole all the candles, presumably for his private use. In our electric days, we forget how precious candles were.

Not all the candles were left in the church by the congregation, however, because on the feast day people also brought other candles to church to be hallowed. Candles blessed at Candlemas were thought to have a special sacred power, suggested by the prayer of blessing that was said over them. The priest chanted, ‘Wherever it shall be lit or set up, may the devil flee away in fear and trembling with all his ministers, out of those dwellings, and never presume again to disquiet your servants.’

People took these hallowed candles home to be lit during a thunderstorm, or when someone was ill, and a Candlemas candle was often placed in the hands of the dying with the words, ‘Lord, let your servant depart in peace according to your word.’

Some people made up imaginative legends about these candles. It was said, for instance, that witches were known to drop wax from the holy candle into the footprints of those they hated, causing their feet to rot off. The misuse of holy things is a dangerous pursuit; so (to counterbalance this superstition) clergy of the time preached many sermons on how the candles represented Christ. The wax was his body; the wick was his soul; and the flame was his Godhead.

It is easy to be dismissive of some of this. We might call much of it irrational nonsense: lighting a candle during a thunderstorm, and so on. But it was a different world then, unknown and raw in many ways. Who wouldn’t have wanted to light a candle in a cold, dark room with a frightened child who was scared of the thunder?

Giving the dying a candle to hold would not get through today's health-and-safety regulations, but in a moving way, the loved ones were placing in that weakening hand their hope in Christ, and asking the one who faced the journey into death to hold on to that hope; for this candle was the light for the journey. Faith in those times was not just for Sundays; it was woven into hard, ordinary lives.

It is a historical fact that the Reformers were cautious about some of these practices. As they focussed on the Word, and on simplification, traditions such as the blessing of the candles at Candlemas came to an end.

In 1548, we are told, the bearing of candles was forbidden throughout the whole City of London. Likewise, there was to be no ash on Ash Wednesday; there were to be no palms on Palm Sunday; and on Pentecost or Whitsun, one of the most unusual traditions came to an end: the swinging of an enormous censer from the roof of St Paul's Cathedral, and the releasing doves to represent the Holy Spirit.

Over time, some of these practices have returned, and I am glad that they have. All of the important things in life need ritualising and enacting: love needs a kiss; insight needs art; grief needs a funeral; and faith needs an enactment, to celebrate and explore its richness and its eternal truths.

Although candles are not mentioned in St Luke's account of the Presentation, it is easy to see why candles became the focus for the day. At the heart of the story is an encounter, a meeting between the old Simeon and the baby Jesus. An old and weary world meets a new, fresh life, and the old man announces that light has broken in: 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.' This light is a light that brings hope; it is a light that brings expectancy.

But there is also the prediction of pain. There is talk of a sword piercing the heart of the child's mother. This light, represented by our infant Lord, is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel; and this light will one day be opposed. As Simeon speaks, we are reminded that light is seen as light only because of the darkness; and that candles need lighting and protecting, because they can easily go out.

The same thing is true of our faith. It needs blessing from time to time: refreshing, nurturing and attending to. We cannot afford to take the gift of faith for granted. Candlemas reminds us that Lent is coming, and during Lent, we are invited to attend to our faith. Let us make sure that we do so.

Someone once said of the actor Dirk Bogarde that he wanted to be a star, but he resented being obliged to twinkle. It can be said that we who are Christians are also obliged to twinkle; to light up, and let the love in the Gospel be seen and felt in a world that is often used to living in half-light. Yes, the candles of Candlemas represent Christ; but you and I are also called to be signs of light, warmth and love. And this means reaching out to those who think that they have been forgotten by God, or to those who think that they can never be drawn into the circle of Christ's light. The light of Christ, he who came to be the light for all people, increases as it is shared.

When the mediaeval clergy blessed candles, and told people to carry them home through the streets and to light them at times of fear and journey, I think that they understood faith – and the importance of our Lord's light in our fragile, precarious lives – only too well.

Amen.