

Readings for Candlemas

2nd February 2023

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-5

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of Hosts.

Second Reading: Hebrews 2:14-18

Since the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Gospel: St Luke 2:22-40

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

A Reflection for Candlemas

On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me, a partridge in a pear tree.

I am sure you recognise the opening lines of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, and I do not propose to continue with the entire rendition of the unlikely series of gifts supposedly sent by the ‘true love’ to the object of his or her affections. Versions of it date from around 1780, and it has attracted much and varied attention over the years. My favourite from childhood remains the radio play by Brian Sibley *And yet another Partridge in a Pear Tree*. Taking the form of a series of thank you letters, it starred Penelope Keith as an increasingly exasperated and then deranged recipient of the gifts. The words appear secular but there are theories that the gifts have hidden theological significance: the true love is Jesus, the two turtle doves are the Old and New Testaments and such like, attributed to times when Roman Catholics in particular were being persecuted; others suggest this is a myth. It does, however, remind us that the Festival of Christmas has twelve days – from Christmas Day to the eve of Epiphany, a tradition that has been around since at least the 6th century.

Or does Christmas have twelve days? One of the joys of the church is that it has room for different traditions. What about the eight days of Christmas? (There’s no song about that as far as I am aware). Keeping eight days, known as an octave, for a major festival is also an ancient tradition, on the basis that great feasts should not be limited to a single day. The number eight is supposed to represent perfection and the keeping of octaves has its origins in many Jewish festival customs. The eight days provide time to reflect on the mystery, joy and grace of the feast.

In an octave, the feast itself is the first day, followed by six lesser festival days, and then the eighth day or octave day which is the second most important day of the octave. So the octave of Christmas runs from Christmas day to the 1st of January, the day we keep as the Naming of Jesus.

At one time, we would have kept the octave for all the major festivals, particularly Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost, this tradition dating from the 4th century in the Eastern Church and a little later in the Western church. Although our modern calendar doesn’t observe these octaves, there are relics of this tradition. For example, each year saints days that fall during Holy Week or the week after Easter are moved, not just until after Easter but until after the octave of

Easter. And it may be coincidental, but the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is eight days, an octave, from 18th to 25th January.

And then there is the tradition of forty days of Christmas, starting on Christmas Day and ending at Candlemas on 2nd February, the festival we are marking today.

As we read in today's Gospel, the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple forty Days after his birth, as prescribed by the Jewish Law for every firstborn male. He was brought to the Temple as a human child as his parents did for him what all devout Jewish parents would do for their child. As the passage from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us: 'he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.' God in Jesus had to become flesh and blood like us, he had to become human, so that he could free us and redeem us.

In the reading from Malachi, we are told that 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple', and here we also have this prophecy being fulfilled as God, in the form of Jesus, comes to his Temple. This was what Simeon and Anna had been faithfully waiting for and, by the Holy Spirit, recognised in this child.

So this festival, marking an event so early in Jesus' life, presents him to the world as both human and divine. It is a fitting conclusion to a season that celebrates his incarnation but it also points us forward to his destiny and all that he will accomplish for the world.

Forty is also a number with Biblical significance. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness; Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai and Jesus spent forty days being tempted in the wilderness. So forty has come down into Christian tradition as a number that signifies important periods of time. As well as forty days of the Christmas season, there are, as I am sure you are aware, forty days in Lent. There are forty days of the Easter season, from Easter to Ascension Day (although the modern church calendar prefers a fifty-day season of Easter, from Easter to Pentecost). And the old season of Advent started earlier than it does now, in mid-November, so it was also forty days long. Forty-day seasons provide more extended opportunities for us to reflect on the significance of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

The festival of Candlemas, the concluding festival of the Christmas season, has been kept since the early days of the church, with accounts of celebrations in Jerusalem dating from the fourth century. When he was brought to the Temple, Simeon recognised Jesus as the light of the world, a theme that appears repeatedly throughout the forty-day Christmas season. So Candlemas has always been associated with light. In mediaeval times, people traditionally swept out the hearth at Candlemas and lit a new fire, and they had new candles blessed. It was a day to bring new light into the home. The spiritual was inter-twined with the everyday.

We no longer need to use candles, blessed or otherwise, to light our home – at least most of the time. But, as we come to the end of this Christmas season (be it eight, twelve or forty days that we prefer) and turn our thoughts towards Lent, Candlemas provides an opportunity to reflect on our spiritual life, to let new light in.

This week, I was given a Candlemas prayer by a friend and I share it with you by way of conclusion.

Lord God, you are the source of everlasting light.

Your Son, our beloved Lord Jesus was presented in the temple forty days after his birth.

He was recognised by Simeon and Anna, and welcomed as the promised Messiah.

May we like them behold the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Grant that we may stand before you with hearts cleansed by your forgiving love.

May we serve you all our days and make your name known as we worship you as our Lord.

So may we come by your grace to eternal life.

Amen