

## Readings for Candlemas Sunday

4<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### 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**

In this last week or so, it has been lovely to see the first snowdrops coming into flower, signs of hope that warmer days are coming, that spring is on the way. Signs of new life, re-birth, resurrection. Even when battered by winds or half-buried in snow, the very sight of them lifts our spirits. It is this joy and this hope that William Wordsworth alludes to in his poem *To a Snowdrop*

Lone Flower, hemmed in with snows and white as they  
But hardier far, once more I see thee bend  
Thy forehead, as if fearful to offend,  
Like an unbidden guest. Though day by day,  
Storms, sallying from the mountain-tops, waylay  
The rising sun, and on the plains descend;  
Yet art thou welcome, welcome as a friend  
Whose zeal outruns his promise! Blue-eyed May  
Shall soon behold this border thickly set  
With bright jonquils, their odours lavishing  
On the soft west-wind and his frolic peers;  
Nor will I then thy modest grace forget,  
Chaste Snowdrop, venturous harbinger of Spring,  
And pensive monitor of fleeting years!

Snowdrops are often found in the grounds of abbeys, priories and in churchyards and, while some people think they were introduced to Britain by the Romans, others think they were brought by monks from mainland Europe and the Middle East. Another name for snowdrops is Candlemas bells; they are symbols of purity and of the Light of Christ shining in the darkness of the world, both themes found in today’s Gospel for Candlemas. This account, of Mary and Joseph coming for their purification and the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, is a story of hope.

As we are told, after forty days, the Law of Moses required purification and for all firstborn boys to be presented in the Temple and redeemed by an appropriate sacrifice. All devout Jews would have done this. Yet, from among the hundreds or thousands of baby boys that they must have seen brought to the Temple over the years for this same ritual, Simeon and Anna are led by the Holy Spirit to recognise this particular child as the one they had been waiting for, the one promised by prophets such as Malachi: 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple'.

Simeon utters the familiar words of what we now know as the Nunc Dimittis:

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.

Simeon recognised in this tiny baby the Light of the World, the hope for all people.

Anna was also a person of hope. Married for only seven years, she would have understood grief and unfulfilled dreams only too well, yet she had chosen to live out her life worshipping God and praying in the Temple, a demonstration of hope in the promises of God. She is the embodiment of hanging on to hope especially in times of pain and difficulty.

Such times are something that Simeon also alludes to when he addresses Mary, telling her that, not only will this child be 'destined for the falling and rising of many', but also 'a sword will pierce your own soul too'. What did Mary make of those words at the time, or during the subsequent years as Jesus grew up? Did they come back to her as she went about her daily chores?

She was a young woman who had just given birth to a baby promised by God, whose coming had been announced by an angel. Astonishing things had already happened in her young life, and she had seen God's extraordinary promises miraculously come to fruition. But this was different; these were words that spoke of pain and grief to come rather than grand words of a promised Messiah and God's plan for salvation. Later on, as everything seemed to fall apart, as Jesus was increasingly rejected and finally betrayed and convicted, as she stood at the foot of his Cross while he died the cruellest of deaths, maybe these long ago words of Simeon came back to her. Words that reminded her of hope in God's promises amidst the pain and sorrow.

Hope is a flickering light that needs to be kept alight in the darkness of the world. As we were reminded at Christmas, when we heard the Prologue to St John's Gospel: The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The darkness of pain and loss seems to be all around us in the world today. The mothers and fathers of Gaza and Israel, of Ukraine, and those many other places of conflict across the world; the parents whose children die of malnutrition as a result of climate change and poverty; the parents of child refugees who don't make it; they, like Mary, must feel that a sword has pierced their soul too. As Christians, we are called to hold onto the hope of God's promises, and to hold out the light of hope to others in the darkness of pain and sorrow in the world. As we are reminded in the letter to the Hebrews, because Jesus himself suffered, he is able to help those who suffer. God promises that, ultimately, there will be comfort, healing and renewal. At times of darkness in our own lives, it can be hard to hang onto that hope, so we carry the light of hope not only for ourselves but also for one another and for all the world.

Simeon's recognition of Jesus as the Light of the World eventually led to the alternative name Candlemas for this festival – the day when people brought their candles to be blessed. In more superstitious times, it was thought that these blessed candles would ward off evil spirits from their homes.

We still use candles today as signs of hope. Remember how, during the Covid pandemic lockdowns, Christians were encouraged to put a lighted candle in their window on a Sunday evening as a sign of prayers for their neighbours. Just last week, on Holocaust Memorial Day, it was suggested that we put a candle in our window to remember those who were murdered simply for who they were, and as a stand against prejudice and hatred today.

Today, as we keep Candlemas, may I suggest that you find a moment to light a candle, or find some snowdrops to admire, and offer a prayer of hope for the world, for light to come in the darkness, for healing and peace?