

Readings for Candlemas

1st February 2026

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-5

Thus says the Lord God: 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

We all like a good story, don't we? I hope so, because today I want to tell you some stories. And the person I want to tell you about is St Bride because today, 1st February, is her Feast Day.

St Bride is a somewhat mystical or even mythical figure, and her life story is shrouded in folklore. She is the foremost saint of Ireland after St. Patrick, and also has strong connections to the west coast of Scotland. There are many legends about her and much of what we know is most probably a conflation of the life of a 5th-6th century Irish Saint and an ancient Celtic goddess, Brigid.

The 'official' version, in my book of saints, is that Bride was born in the mid to late 5th century, a few miles from Kildare. She was of humble origins, but one legend says that she was baptised by St Patrick. She became a nun in the monastery at Kildare, and later its Abbess. Another legend said that she was consecrated a Bishop due to her likeness to the Virgin Mary – a somewhat heretical thought in the mediaeval period! She died in or around the year 525 CE. She was known for her compassion and for having a particular affinity with animals and the natural world in general. Her life story was first recorded in the 7th century, about the same time as that of Patrick.

That's one version. Another version of her life story is that she was the daughter of an Irish chieftain and an enslaved Christian woman and was brought up by druids before entering the monastery at Kildare. Yet another version is that she was the daughter of noble Christian parents. And on Iona, there is a story that she grew up there. In Somerset, they believe that she visited Glastonbury at some point in her life. One of the more surprising miracles attributed to her is that she turned water into beer!

You may know that St Bride is associated with the bird, the oystercatcher. There are at least two legends making this connection. One is that Bride was running away from evil men who were intent on killing her and reached a beach where there was nowhere to hide. Realising she was trapped, she lay down to pray, and the oystercatchers covered her with seaweed, hiding her so completely that, when her pursuers appeared, she was nowhere to be seen. A different legend tells of Bride becoming becalmed at sea, in one version while on a missionary journey from Ireland to South Uist. The oystercatchers flew to her boat and, by beating their wings, filled the sail so that she could travel safely to land. From that legend comes a belief that Bride sends oystercatchers to guide sailors to safety. Thus, in Gaelic, oystercatchers are known as *gille-brìghde* - servants of Bride.

You may be wondering why, although it is her feast day, I am focussing so much on St Bride when we are celebrating Candlemas, the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple. It is the last hurrah of Christmas as we turn towards Lent and Easter.

Well, there is another legend about Bride ... This story tells that Bride was miraculously transported to Bethlehem to serve as midwife to Mary at the birth of Jesus, and she is sometimes described as a nurse or foster mother to Jesus. Associated with this is a legend that she protected the Holy Family by running through the streets of Bethlehem to distract Herod's soldiers when they were searching for the infant Jesus to kill him, allowing the Holy Family to escape. This link to Mary and the birth of Jesus gives rise to another name for Bride: *Moire nan Gàidheal* – Mary of the Gaels. A further legend says that Bride was also present at Jesus' crucifixion, guided there by an oystercatcher.

Clearly, and especially if we are looking for a chronological timeline of a life and 'facts', there are all sorts of difficulties in reconciling these different legends, but that's not their purpose. Not only will historians tell you that there are different versions of history depending on who is telling it, but stories don't have to be factually accurate to be 'true'. After all, we see that with children's fairy tales, stories that convey moral truths about life.

St Bride's feast day and Candlemas both coincide with the ancient Celtic festival of Imbolc – the early church was very good at adopting local festivals and Christianising them! And all these festivals are to do with light, an underlying truth about light coming into the world. Imbolc, halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, celebrates the gradual return of light and the first signs of spring after the darkness of midwinter, especially in these northern latitudes. David reminded us last year that snowdrops are also called Candlemas bells, appearing as they do at this time of year as signs of new growth and new beginnings. And the oystercatchers, many of which migrate south over the winter in search of food, start to return around now, their return indicating that spring is coming and light and warmth are on their way, dispelling the darkness.

So too, when Jesus was presented in the Temple, he was recognised by Simeon as the one bringing light to a dark world. As he said through the familiar words of what we now know as the *Nunc dimittis* or Song of Simeon: 'my eyes have seen your salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'. So Candlemas is a festival celebrating the light that has come into the world through Jesus. And that light has been carried down the centuries by many people spreading the good news. By people like Bride through her works of compassion and through her missionary journeys through these Celtic lands.

But, just as the legends of Bride that tell us of her presence at Jesus' birth are accompanied by another linking her to Jesus' crucifixion, so too the account of Jesus' presentation in the Temple, as well as concluding the stories of Jesus birth, also points us forward to Good Friday. Simeon alludes to this in his words to Mary: 'This child is destined for the falling and 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'.

At this pivotal point in the year, both Simeon and the legends of St Bride recognise that we can't have Christmas without Good Friday, but both festivals also recognise the reality of the Light of Christ. In the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it'.

So today, as we take our final look back at Christmas and turn our thoughts towards Lent and Holy Week, we are also pointed forward to Easter and the Light that overcomes all darkness.