

Sermon – Sunday 3rd February – 9.30 am

I was working in the Parish Office one afternoon this week when the telephone rang. It was a salesman from one of the companies that specialises in church produce, and his opening line was, “Have you started thinking about your Lent and Easter requirements yet?”

After I’d got over the urge to say, “Lent? Easter? What are they? I’ve never heard of them”, I realised that I had a far better get-out clause. Take his number and hand it over to Janet, who knows far more about what we need for Lent and Easter than I ever could.

But still, with January barely over, that telephone call was a reminder of the way we can tend to spend our lives relentlessly moving on to the next thing. Even within the church it is easy to get caught up in the need to have planned Lent before Christmas is even over. It can feel as though there is barely time to draw breath, to appreciate the present, because there is always something else on the horizon.

Perhaps that is why I like Candlemas so much. During the Epiphany season we have remembered the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus; the baptism of Jesus; the wedding at Cana when Jesus turned water into wine; and last week Jesus speaking the words of the prophet Isaiah in the Temple, setting out his life’s purpose.

Yet today we find ourselves right back with the infant Jesus, as he is presented at the Temple, forty days after his birth. Somehow this break in the chronological sequence has the ability to nudge us out of our rut. To get us off the treadmill that draws us from one season to the next without taking time to experience them afresh.

One of the fascinating things about Candlemas is that it has come in and out of favour. There are interesting reasons for this. Our modern sensibilities struggle somewhat with the original purposes of the day. In accordance with Jewish laws in Leviticus, a woman was to be presented for purification by sacrifice 33 days after a boy’s circumcision. And the presentation of Christ himself was performing the redemption of the firstborn son, in obedience to the Torah.

Traditionally for Christians, Candlemas is the time that we bless those candles to be used throughout the year – and this used to mean people would bring their candles from home to be blessed, too. Yet even in pre-Christian times there was a festival of light around this time, and the celebration has not escaped popular superstitions. Only this week I was reminded of this rhyme:

If Candlemas Day be fair and bright
Winter will have another fight.
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,
Winter won't come again.

All I will say is I wouldn’t count on it being true!

So if that’s the background to Candlemas, perhaps what really matters is finding out what it might mean for us today. I began by speaking of that sense we can get of moving relentlessly from one thing to the next, and the way Candlemas can offer an interruption to that relentlessness.

As you know, yesterday morning the PCC met to begin to think about our Church Development Plan, which will shape our focus in the coming years. And the really important thing is that this is not about the plan, but it's actually about us. It's about who we are as followers of Jesus. It's about where we have come from; where we have been; where we are now; and where we think we might be going.

Take a moment with me to picture the scene in the Temple on that day when Mary and Joseph entered with their son. We have two parents, faithfully following the traditions of their ancestors as they bring their son to the Temple. There are ways in which this scene encourages us to look back and remember where we have come from. Joseph is descended from the line of David, a key aspect of Jesus's identity. He has shown himself to be honourable. There is a solidity in all he represents, grounding this scene. Mary is equally faithful, she has shown her obedience, yet she has already dared to look ahead. When she met with Elizabeth before Jesus was born, she had already started to understand the significance of Jesus's place in history.

Anna and Simeon are figures who represent this present moment. We get a glimpse of what has brought each of them to this place, but their role in this scene is the here and now. They both know who Jesus is and recognise his importance. Anna is no stranger to the Temple, a woman devoted to prayer and fasting. Yet when she sees Jesus, she praises God and speaks about Jesus to all those seeking redemption. Simeon has been shown by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah. And as soon as he sees Jesus, he knows that moment has come. There is something extraordinary about the role of these two individuals, both recognising their role in pointing others towards God, neither stealing the limelight for themselves.

And of course we have the infant Jesus, representing what lies ahead. A sign of hope for the future. Of light and life, though not without pain.

In this Candlemas scene, we capture so much that is essential in all that the PCC were discussing yesterday. When we look forward, we cannot do so without remembering where we have come from. Our traditions. Those things that brought us to this place and keep us coming back. We also need to acknowledge where we are now. At this moment in time. Where we see God at work. Where there are signs of hope and new life.

And it is from that basis and foundation, and by celebrating all that we already are, that we look forward. That we begin to discern where God is calling us.

There is something helpful about process and about planning, but what is more important is our story. Because our story encompasses where we have come from and where we are as well as where we are going. And Candlemas reminds us of one more thing. It reminds us of the one whom we follow – that any planning must be grounded in prayer and connection with God, and that we are to be led and guided at all times by the light of Christ in our midst.

Amen