

## Candlemas 2020

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen, please sit down

Two weeks ago, I was privileged to go to Champneys at Henlow and one of the activities I did was Nordic Walking, as we walked around Henlow Lakes in the woodland beside us there were hundreds of early snowdrops.

In Mediaeval times, snowdrops were known as Candlemas bells, these tiny fragile white flowers light up the woodland floor and from a distance they look pure white. The best way to view them is to bend or kneel, a close-up view shows touches of green, the colour of life. Despite the weather conditions, these hardy little bulbs burst through each year with a promise of Spring and new life to come.

Today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas, a festival of light.

This is the 3rd celebration of light in a short time. 40 days ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus, Gods son born in human form, and our Christmas morning reading from John says “the Light shone in the darkness and came into the world but the world did not recognise it”. At that time, the light was seen only by a few - all Jewish people, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds.

This was followed by The feast of Epiphany- the light revealed firstly to the Jews now appeared to foreigners, in the form of the Magi, the wisemen,

Today, at the festival of Candlemas we hear how Simeon and Anna have been waiting, and at last see Jesus - they represent the faithful Church, all Christians who are waiting for and will recognise the light.

Today we will be removing the crib scene from Church as we move from cradle to cross. We are about half way between Christmas and Easter, half way between hope in the form of a baby to facing the cross and, importantly, to freedom in the empty tomb. Half way between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, moving from cold to warmth.

Today we use candles to symbolise light, they have been used to extinguish darkness for thousands of years, think about time before the electric light that we take for granted....think of how we use candles to evoke comforting messages, candles on birthday cakes, romantic candlelit dinners, candlelight carol services and I am sure most of us have a candle or two in a drawer, just in case!

If you are in the dark, just a light from one candle will expel the darkness, we can read Jesus’s message to us all in John, chapter 9, where He says “I am the light of the world”.

Looking at today's Gospel reading, I wonder what Simeon and Anna were doing that day when they recognised Jesus? They must have seen hundreds of babies in their time, what made this baby so special?

Simeon, we read was devout - he put God central in his life, we often think of him being old although it doesn't say anywhere that he was, just that God had promised that he would not die until he had seen the Christ, and we don't know when and how God had told him this. It was because he put God central in his life that he had been chosen.

We know that Anna was old, she was 84 and in the temple day and night fasting and praying and had done so since her husband had died many years before, fully dedicated to God she led a life of penitence, praise and prayer.

Through these two, God's promise was answered. Just think, in the temple that day there must have been hundreds of people going about their business and yet God brought the baby Jesus, Simeon and Anna into the same place at the same time.

I wonder if, for just a moment, that Simeon was disappointed with what he saw.....God's answer came in the form of a tiny baby?

What was he expecting? A warrior on a white horse with an army marching behind?

Or was he content to accept whatever God sent to him?

Let's not forget the parents, Mary and Joseph. Carrying their firstborn son, their special son, trying, still, to make sense of how he came to be and everything that had happened since, and this journey now, to the Temple. The journey to Bethlehem on the donkey, the census, angels, shepherds and wise men, and then looking after a newborn baby, crying, waking, sleeping feeding, normality...was it a bit of an anticlimax, no more exceptional things happening, just a baby, like any other baby, and a duty to go to the temple, like all good Jewish parents, to give an offering for their firstborn son and go through the purification rights for Mary, doing what was expected.

Perhaps nervously entering the Temple...would their two doves be offering enough? What were they supposed to do...When Simeon approached them and greets them with those words...which, at first sound harmless enough "Lord, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word for my eyes have seen your salvation".... but then he turns to Mary, looks her in the eye and says...

"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."

Mary could be in no doubt, since the visit of the Angel, her meeting with Elizabeth, Joseph's initial rejection then acceptance, their journey by donkey

to Bethlehem, shepherds, wise men and now this- a life of joy but also a life of pain.

A remarkable life, but also a life of ups and downs, a life not so much unlike ours. You may have approached this New Year, and new decade, 2020, with anticipation and joy, or may be you are at the other end of the scale, scared, or in despair and worried.

Sometimes the light that everyone says is at the end of the tunnel seems along way way and not even visible, but the good news is that that light, the light of Jesus that shone in the Temple on that first Candle-mass day has never failed and remains with us, here today.

Today Christmas and Epiphany come to an end. The light in the crib is turned off and the figures packed away. We turn away from our celebrations of Christ's birth and look towards Lent and our preparations for his passion, death and resurrection. For us, as it was for Mary, this is a day when joy and pain collide. But it is also a day when we light candles, candles to remind us of the "light to reveal God to all the nations...and for glory to your people Israel." Candles to remind us that Emmanuel, God is with us, always even when we are downhearted or feeling hopeless.

Candlemas is the promise of light, Jesus' love and light shining in the darkness.

Will you join me as we prepare to turn away from the crib and face the cross to start to think of what we can do in the 40 days of Lent which will soon be upon us. Will this be a time to dig a little deeper, to pray or read a little more, or may be to make a new commitment or connection within your own personal faith.

Perhaps today is the day when you and I will decide to change something, perhaps to listen to what God is asking from us or perhaps to know what it is we are waiting for.

If we keep our eyes and ears open to the riches of this earth, such as the first snowdrops then our lives can become richer, as Jesus our friend and saviour lights our way ahead. Amen