

Candlemas 2021

Luke 2:22-40 Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

22 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 **23** (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), **24** and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;^[a] this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.^[b] **27** Guided by the Spirit, Simeon^[c] came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, **28** Simeon^[d] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[e] in peace,
according to your word;

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for my eyes have seen your salvation,

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which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

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

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. **34** Then Simeon^[f] 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 **35** so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna^[g] 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, **37** 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. **38** At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child^[h] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40** The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

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

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, God's 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 the 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".

I think the feast of Candlemass is the one festival that I have preached on more times than any others, in fact I think it was one of the first sermons I ever did. Now it's difficult to think of something different to say so I thought rather than Simeon and Anna, today I would focus on Mary.

Today I want to ask why did Simeon have some personal words for Jesus's mother, Mary?

And I want to think, in particular, of the words that Simeon says to Mary:

We read how he turned to her and said "...And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple was part of the process which defined the Jewishness of Jesus. In the Old Testament – prophets had prophesied that the Messiah would be a Jew, and more specifically a Jew from the line of David.

When Jesus is brought to be presented in the Temple to God, Luke recounts an interesting story

The story of the priest Simeon being led by God to go back into the Temple, at that specific time because "It had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ"

I would bet that if you were to have asked Simeon what the greatest day of his life – he would have replied that it was on the day when he saw the Messiah of Israel, the baby Jesus.

It was worth the wait.

But I don't want to focus on Simeon today. Nor Anna the prophetess

I want to speak instead about Mary, the Mother of Jesus instead.

I wonder if you have ever thought: Why did God choose Mary to be the mother of his Son Jesus here on earth?

I believe God specifically chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus.

And I believe the answer lies in the character of Mary that we see in the Scriptures.

From Luke's Gospel, I see three important character traits that we, as Christians, would do well to adopt for ourselves

The first character trait is

1. Her trust

When the angel Gabriel came to her (as recorded in Luke 1: 26-38) and tells her of Jesus imminent birth he says:

"Mary do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. You will conceive and bear a son and you must name him Jesus"

She could have had half a dozen excuses to say no if she had wanted to:

i) She could have said; "Lord I'm not that kind of girl, and I'm not ready to be a mother."

ii) She could have said: no way, I'm not married and Joseph won't believe me

iii) She could have said: "I am NOT worthy of this honour - maybe it should be given to someone else more worthy." or

iv) She could have said: "Lord, OK but can you just wait till I have married Joseph" BUT that's NOT what Mary said.

What she actually said was:

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be as you have said..."

Mary had a breath-taking trust that God knew what He was doing when he entrusted her with the job of raising his son Jesus.

And she must have believed with God's help she could do the job.

I'd like to look in a bit more detail at the next character trait of Mary:

2. Her Commitment:

Mary knew who God was - and who she was - His servant.

And she knew nothing was impossible for her God.

Let's face it – a virgin birth was not anything she had come across before

But if God had said it, Mary knew that it would happen, even if she didn't really understand how, and if God wanted to give her the task of having the Son of God - then she would accept it.

Mary's commitment can be found in the story in the stable (Luke Chapter 2, verse 19)

Luke writes

"But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart".

Did you notice what he said about Mary?

While the others were simply amazed – Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

And she did play an important part in Jesus life.

She was his mother, we see her weeping at the foot of the Cross.

And we see how special she is to Jesus because even though Jesus was in agony on the Cross, He put Mary into the care of the Beloved disciple John.

3. Thirdly, Her Bravery

Mary's bravery is often overlooked.

Her obedience to the Will of God could have been very costly.

i) The best- case scenario was that she could have expected Joseph to reject her and break off the engagement. Then she would have been left as a single mother with a baby to support, with no income or support from her parents or community.

She might have survived by begging and hoping her parents would look after them.

But very often, the family would be so ashamed of the shame that she, as an adulteress, had brought on the family – that they would have nothing to do with her.

She would be left to bring up the child on her own – in a society where there was no social security – and the Government didn't put you to the top of the housing list.

And once her neighbours in Nazareth found out – she'd have been ostracised.

In fact, that is what Joseph had planned to do with Mary when he saw she was pregnant - until God intervened in a dream to him.

If that was the best-case scenario, what was the worst-case scenario?

In those days, she might have been stoned to death as an adulteress.

In Israel in Jesus 'day, a woman who was engaged was considered so far as adultery was concerned – as if she was married.

And the penalty for adultery was death.

And a pregnancy was all the proof they needed!!

It took immense bravery to say:

"I am the handmaid of the Lord – let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38)

Following God can be costly –I don't know if I would have displayed the courage that Mary did.

You might recall, at the start I asked a question:

Why did Simeon have some personal words for Jesus' mother Mary.

My belief is that, through Simeon, God gave Mary a warning of what Jesus was going to go through.

In fact, Simeon's words were – if you think about it, a confirmation of the meaning of the third gift the Magi brought – the gift of myrrh which was associated with death.

As she stood at the foot of the Cross, Mary could have thought that God had made an terrible mistake when He allowed Jesus to be crucified.

But it wasn't a mistake. It was - as Simeon told Mary - part of God's original plan.

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 **trust**, to pray or read a little more, or may be to make a new **commitment** or connection within your own personal faith. Or like Mary to take a **brave** step into the future.

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 then our lives can become richer, as Jesus our friend and Saviour lights our way ahead. Amen