

Candlemas

2nd February 2020

'The light of Christ'

Malachi 3: *the Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter His Temple*

Ps 23: *Let Him enter, the King of glory!*

Heb 2: *He should in this way be completely like his brothers.*

Lk 2: 22–32: *a light to enlighten the pagans ...*

Only last week, speaking on the 'Sunday of the Word of God,' did I make a big thing of its being the 'Year of Matthew' and encouraged you each to take away a Gospel of Matthew and to start to read it right through, at your own pace, in the coming weeks or months. No sooner have we said that than — because of the feast-day of the 2nd February, Candlemas — we find ourselves not in Matthew, but in Luke this Sunday ... but then this episode, the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, only occurs in Luke. Next weekend we will return to Matthew, and for the Sundays up to the beginning of Lent, we will hear from the Lord's famous 'Sermon on the Mount.'

As for today's feast, it's a brief return to the follow-up to Christmas. 40 days after the birth of a child, Jewish Law required a sacrificial ritual at the temple for the purification of the mother (hence the pair of turtledoves, the offering of poor families); and additionally, for a first-born

son, his dedication to the Lord and his 'redemption' by a further offering of 5 shekels. These ceremonies combine in this beautiful episode in the life of the young Jesus.

It's a touching scene: the baby boy, Jesus; the very young couple Mary and Joseph; and then the very elderly holy man and holy woman, Simeon and Anna. The interplay between these characters, in the sacred precincts of the Temple in Jerusalem, is powerful, but in many ways this encounter points beyond themselves to God and His loving plan. We might say, that the real person at the centre of this event is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gave Mary the courage to say 'yes' to God's plan; it was the Holy Spirit who came upon her, after her acquiescence, that the Son of God might be conceived in her; it was the Holy Spirit who gave Joseph, her husband, the will to play his own part in caring for Mary and providing protection, a home, and family, to the Son of God. And as for the old, devout, members of Israel, representing Israel's long wait for the Messiah — it was the Holy Spirit, also, who drew them each to the Temple, to *this* young couple, and to *this*

particular child, as they came to perform those ceremonies as good and observant Jews. We can see this scene, then, as utterly bathed in the light of the Holy Spirit. Simeon and Anna are reinvigorated, and acquire a new youth, as their eyes are completely opened to just *who* has been born, in *their* time, in *their* place; and Mary and Joseph's eyes are also opened, to more of what their care for Jesus will ultimately mean ... In particular, Mary receives that prophecy from Simeon that as well as the joys, she will also have a share in the sufferings of her Son.

Simeon's canticle, at the heart of the episode, is a text that the Church values so much as to give it a place in the daily 'Night Prayer' of the Church. Let's hear it again, the poignant words of aged but happy Simeon, as we think of the centuries-long wait that Israel had, for the Messiah to come; and how He would bring the light of God's Holy Spirit not just to Israel, but to all mankind: "*At last, all-powerful Master, you give leave to Your servant to go in peace, according to Your promise, for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared for all nations, the*

light to enlighten the Gentiles, and give glory to Israel, Your people." These are words that many recite daily at the end of the day, in homes and churches and monasteries the world over. It's a way of renewing our youthful fervour of faith, in the knowledge that the Lord gives life; it's a way of being peaceful about the fact that this life has its end; and it's a way of being thankful that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of all mankind, and to know Him and love Him is to have all that we could possibly need.

This is all light, then! This is all enlightenment, light shining in darkness, light lighting up our life. And it's why the Church chooses to celebrate this feast — recalling Christmas, but pointing also towards the Passion and Easter — with the processional light of candles. Let's make sure that the light of our faith is burning brightly, so that we can also be a light — bringing the warmth of compassion, and the certainty of a guide — to others around us, with the sure and inextinguishable light of Jesus Christ. That child, born to Mary, protected and honoured by Joseph, revered by Anna, and Simeon — He is our light for life.