

## Sunday 3rd February 2019 Candlemas ChCh-St. Luke's

**Readings: Malachi 3:1-5**

**Heb 2:14-18**

**Luke 2:22-40** Presentation of Jesus in the temple

### Reflection

Next Saturday, a number of us will participate in two significant events – a convergence of tradition and epiphany: in the morning, the episcopal ordination of The Revd. Dr. Peter Carrell and in the afternoon, the installation of The Right Revd. Dr. Peter Carrell as ninth Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Christchurch. I'm anticipating that the *first event*, while not taking place in a Cathedral, will be full of the tradition, liturgy and pageantry of the church – even as it embraces a mixture of church music – both traditional and modern. There will be civic dignitaries, archbishops, bishops and archdeacons in all their finery, ecumenical representatives, clergy, laity, family and friends.

The indoor service will contain familiar words of presentation, affirmation of faith and commitment, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the ordination with laying on of hands by other bishops and the Eucharist for all to share. Those involved will no doubt feel the significant weight of church tradition and continuity as another bishop joins the long line of bishops ordained across the centuries of Christianity and across the world.

But I'm thinking that the *second event* – the *installation* of our new bishop - might be rather different. Imagine for a moment – school and other diocesan representatives, parishioners – young and old - gathering with their church banners in every corner of Cathedral Square, then moving in procession behind their archdeacon, to converge and surround their new bishop, as close to our Cathedral as possible – a Cathedral now destined for reinstatement. What a colourful public display of Christian presence in the heart of our city. What a public proclamation of faith and hope, expressing again the soul of our city. What a powerful representation of light-bearers for Christ, coming from the diverse communities in which they seek to shine day by day. May it be so.

But what does this have to do with today's Feast of Candlemas and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple? Well, it is here, today, that we encounter – through Simeon and Anna – the convergence of tradition and epiphany at the *foundation* of our faith. From the ancient and familiar, to the manifestation of something new. In our gospel reading, Luke describes for *his* pagan convert audience (and for us), the ancient Jewish sacrificial rites of purification, the presentation of the firstborn in the Temple and the prophetic tradition, through which faithful elders Simeon and Anna (who have eyes and mystic insight to perceive) now discern a new revelation – a light to *all* nations. For Simeon recognizes Jesus as the "...light to enlighten the gentiles, and the Glory (Shekinah, or the glorious presence of God) of your people Israel." This light, born in darkest night, has begun to shine and spread everywhere, both home (Israel) and abroad (Gentiles).

The feast we celebrate this day is a rich and multifaceted solemnity, observed by the Church in Jerusalem at least as early as the fourth century. The *candles* traditionally blessed and carried into church on this day, particularly in the northern hemisphere, celebrate this revelation.

I wonder what thoughts were running through Mary' and Joseph's minds as they carried Jesus through the Jerusalem streets that day?

What would it have been like to be there? Senses assaulted by sights, sounds, smells and touch. Crowds of people – Temple-worshippers, money-changers and sellers, cages of sacrificial animals and birds ... when amongst the crowds, amidst the hustle and bustle, old faithful Simeon, observing it all with tired eyes, suddenly sees Him; and the Holy Spirit stirs his heart and his eyes enlighten his soul: he *sees* the child Jesus, and deep within him...he *knows*. What joy he must have felt – the long-awaited moment of encounter with his Lord...Messiah!

He makes his way slowly and purposefully, to Mary, and takes Jesus in his arms and blesses God, and speaks those wonderful words, words still uttered in reverence at every service of evensong and night prayer, words which are sung during candlelight

processions on this day around the world. *“Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised: For these eyes of mine have seen the Saviour, whom you have prepared for all the world to see. A light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.”*

Yet, with prophetic insight, Simeon sees more than this. Jesus is the light of the world and will usher in the new covenant, but at a great and terrible price: it will be sealed in his blood at Calvary. Simeon says to Mary, *“This child is destined to be a sign which men reject.... and you, too, shall be pierced to the heart.”*

In Luke’s account of this event, we encounter an icon of complementarity and genuine synergy. There is a complementary role and a complementary witness that shifts kaleidoscopically as we consider the characters as individuals, as pairs, and as an entire unit. We behold men alongside women, an elder generation alongside a younger generation, a widow alongside a virgin mother, a public ritual fulfilling the obligation of Jewish religious law alongside the secret revelation of God’s Messiah, the giver of that Law himself.<sup>1</sup>

And then there is the invisible character of the Holy Spirit, moving and pulsing in the space between, inspiring and propelling these significant encounters, like an artist creating astonishing new, secondary hues from a palette of primary colors.

The Feast of Candlemas is like a great bitter-sweet hinge, looking back and forward. It looks back to the forty days of light and rejoicing which we have celebrated during Christmas and Epiphany, and it brings that period to a close. But it also looks forward, and anticipates the forty days of Lent and the events of Christ’s passion and death. The candle which speaks of light and warmth and comfort is also a flame, burning, searing, purifying and judging.

Each of us probably knows in our own lives something of both these sides of Candlemas: the light, the joy, the comfort of knowing and loving the One who is the light of the world – but also the struggle to take up our cross and follow him. We need companions and we need the collective, as we live out our journey.

One of the things we can find most difficult as Christians is that we can't see very far ahead. Walking by faith is a bit like walking around the house at night with just a candle. At first it's quite fun – but it soon gets frustrating. The candle only lights up a small area around it – just enough to go forward – but most of the room is still in darkness. Our faith is real, as bright, as burning as ever: and yet it doesn't give us all the answers. . . why certain people have to suffer (why we have to suffer!): why disasters happen: why good people get a terrible deal – so much is still in shadows. Even Mary and Joseph walked in the shadows, into an unknown future with their baby son. Even the elders, Simeon and Anna, had lived in the shadows, yet faithful and waiting..... For the prophet Anna, *her* faithfulness had covered eighty-four years of widowhood – eighty-four years of devotion to God in Temple worship and prayer. And then.....after eighty-four years....the candle-light burst into flaming glory as she recognized and proclaimed the redeeming love of God in the child Jesus.

The Feast of Candlemas, when we both look back to Christmas and forward to the Passion and Cross is a good time to take stock. To look back on *our* lives and see where we have been: the steps we have taken, the choices we have made. And then to look forward in hope and in trust. To listen to the voice of God calling us onward. We probably won't be able to see very far ahead. But we can ask God to give us the courage and faith to risk – like Mary and Joseph - taking that step, and following him on the way that leads to fullness of life.

We can pray for the faithfulness, devotion and wisdom of old Simeon and the prophet Anna in the Temple. We need partners in the fulfillment of our baptismal ministry, and the greatest synergy may be found in partnership with those whose life and circumstances, perspective and worldview, vocation or spirituality are quite different from our own. Men need women, elders need youngsters, carpenters need temple widows and righteous prophets need virgin mothers to bring to fulfillment God's work in the world.<sup>ii</sup>

This Candlemas, and in the days ahead, may we embrace both tradition and transformation as we follow and reflect the light of the world.

Helen Roud

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<sup>i</sup> 'Partnership', Br. Keith Nelson, Society of Saint John the Evangelist

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*