

Worship for The Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (also known as Candlemas)

Reading 1 Malachi 3:1-5

³ “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵ “So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the Lord Almighty.

Reading 2: Luke 2:22-35 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; ^[d] 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. ^[e] ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon ^[f] 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 ^[g] took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant ^[h] in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² 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 ^[i] 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.”

The lockdown has meant that many of us have been unable to see as much of our families as we would have liked. My granddaughter Ava, who is over in Lancashire, was born at the beginning of November 2019. Most of her life has been under various levels of restrictions in terms of how much I am able to see her – and that is very frustrating. A lot of what I have seen of her has been photographs and video clips via WhatsApp or video calls and when I have been able to see her in person, it’s been outside. But despite all that, she seems to recognise me.

Sometimes when I do see her – virtually or in person – I think about what her future may be. What will be her talents, who will she look most like in the family, what potential is within her. I am sure we have all done that at some point with children we have known. Sometimes it seems obvious; sometimes it is not so clear.

When Jesus was brought to the Temple by Joseph and Mary, the events around his birth must have given them lots to think about in terms of who he would be as an adult, but they can't really have begun to comprehend what it all meant for them or for him. Simeon was an old man, who had lived in hope of something new, and probably wondered if he would live to see it come to pass, although Luke tells us the Holy Spirit had reassured him that he would. He wasn't a priest and isn't described as having any official religious role at all – he is just described as devout.

Simeon meets Joseph and Mary and takes the child into his arms, and sees something in him that is unique – that he would be like a light to the nations as well as glory for Israel. And I wonder if Simeon himself saw the connection between this child and the prophecy that we heard Sarah read from Malachi. It's not obvious – the Lord coming to his Temple in Malachi sounds big, powerful and quite scary. Someone who purifies the Temple to make its worship have integrity again. Whereas this baby who has come to the Temple is vulnerable and dependant.

However, Simeon can see something off what he will become. The Gospels tells us several visits Jesus made to the Temple when he was older – and there must have been more than that. On one occasion he does indeed cleanse the Temple, throwing out those who were trading in the area where people who were not Jews were supposed to be able to come and pray. And so he fulfilled Simeon's words.

Usually, the candles of Candlemas are very lovely and atmospheric. It's a story around a new baby being made a fuss of. But it's not just a feel-good tale; it marks the end of the baby stories. It anticipates struggle and conflict to come. It points to the need for justice, and for all people to have the opportunity to know God for themselves. And ultimately it points towards the journey Jesus will take to the cross, as we hear Simeon say to Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul. She will be there at the foot of the cross to see Jesus die, and Simeon's words must have come back to her vividly at that point.

That's why in our Candlemas services in church, we turn from the crib to the cross to symbolise this change in the season and in the story we are following. The festivities of Christmas are over, Lent is on its way, and this in-between time is for us to adjust from one focal point to another. A time to move from gathering around celebrating a baby, to seeing all the potential that baby grew into, and the life-changing and world-changing message he came to bring.

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple, in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts,
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**