

20140202CandlemasSermon

Today is the ancient festival that marks, in the Northern Hemisphere, the midpoint of winter, halfway between the shortest day and the spring equinox. In pre-Christian days, this day was known as the 'Feast of Lights' and celebrated the increasing strength of the life-giving sun as winter gave way to spring (once again applicable in the Northern Hemisphere only).

The Church, following the advice of its Lord, Jesus to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves", used this same day to commemorate the ritual purification of Mary forty days after the birth of her son Jesus; also to remember the presentation of Jesus Christ in the Temple. This is its official name and it commemorates the biblical injunction that, forty days after the birth of a Jewish boy, he was to be taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be presented to God by his thankful parents.

But this feast is also called Candlemas and this links the Christian symbol of light with the pre-Christian 'Feast of Lights.' In the early Church this was the day of the year when all the candles, that were to be used in the church during the coming year, were brought into church and a blessing was said over them - so it was the Festival Day of the Candles or Candlemas.

Candles were important in those days not only because there was no electric lights. Some people thought they gave protection against plague and illness and famine. For Christians, they were (and still are) a reminder of something even more important. Before Jesus came to earth, it was as if everyone was 'in the dark'. People often felt lost and lonely. Afraid. As if they were on their own, with no one to help them. Then came Jesus with his message that he is with his followers always ready to help and comfort them. As if he is a guiding light to them in the darkness. We often talk of Jesus as 'the light of the World' - and that is why candles are lit during church services to remind us of this.

I remember reading a history of the Church of England in South Africa, now called REACH. It asked why churches with electric light should place candles on the Lord's Table. Well, let's explore this idea of light...

Our gospel tells us that Simeon praised God and said: *"My eyes have seen your salvation – a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people, Israel."* Light is a powerful symbol – one used not only in Christianity and Judaism, but in all the world's great religions. You will see votive candles being lit in Hindu temples, Buddhist ashrams, Sikh temples and of course Christian churches. This is because light is a powerful symbol with the many positive associations it conveys. **Light shows us the way:** we need a torch to help us find the right way in the dark or car headlights and street lights to illuminate the roads.

Light helps us to find what we have lost: when you have mislaid or dropped something, often it is only when you are able to shine a light on the place that it is found. Remember parable of the women who lost those two coins – she lit a lamp to search for them.

But **light can also reveal what is wrong;** it shows up dirt and damage clearly; think of the doctor who uses a small bright light to look in your ear, or down your throat, or in your eye, to see what needs treatment. Then, light and heat is also used to help the process of sterilisation and healing.

Light is important for life and growth. The sun works to promote growth; we human imitate that when we use artificial light to bring plants to flower or mature early.

Light is also important to us as a warning. We can think of the revolving light of a lighthouse, keeping ships away from dangerous rocks and sandbanks; or of the flashing lights on emergency vehicles, or around road works; or the warning lights on a broken down car, and the guiding cat's eyes in the middle of the road, warning of bends.

Light also is a symbol of celebration – fireworks being used to mark special occasions; the coloured lights we put up at festivals, especially Christmas; and the candles on birthday cakes.

Because of all these associations, we use light to speak of Jesus. We heard forty days ago on Christmas Day John telling us that Jesus is the Light of the World, the true light who illuminates every human being.

Through the events, the sayings and the parables in the Gospels, we learn that Jesus is the light who can guide us to the truth about God, and the right path of life. We learn that his is the light that will help us to find those who are lost. We understand that his life is like the powerful light which shows up what is wrong and needs treatment.

Simeon warned and prophesied about this when he said: *'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 Jesus' life is also a warning of the dangers that surround our journey of faith.*

But more importantly for us, Jesus is also a light that brings us warmth and growth. I often use the phrase the Sun of Righteousness when I give the blessing at the end of the service. That is S-U-N not S-O-N; so to those who recognise the light, Jesus is a sign of celebration, hope, reconciliation and joy.

In this technological age, we could just as well use an electric light to stand for Jesus as the historian of CESA suggested; but we continue to use candles. Why?

I think it is because, unlike a beam of electric light, the candle flame seems alive. It moves, flickers, changes; it is affected by the atmosphere around it, growing bigger or fading according to the amount of air that is available. In that respect it is so like a human being, vulnerable to its environment; and as the writer to the Hebrews emphasises, Jesus was able to be our Saviour precisely because he too was subject to the forces of nature, as we are.

Furthermore, one commentator suggests that the candle flame is the proper symbol for the 'little people' – the ones who no-one takes much notice of. Did you notice that they are the sort of people who figure large in the Candlemas story: Joseph and Mary, the humble parents from the countryside who could not afford a lamb so they use two turtle doves. These humble parents were going to perform their religious duties in the mighty Temple, symbol of the power and prestige of their religion. And then there is Simeon and Anna, representatives of the old and often disregarded members of society. You cannot disregard the power of an electric searchlight; but like a human being, a candle is vulnerable. If violence is done to it, it can be snuffed out.

And that is part of the Candlemas story too. As well as the joyful associations, candles are also a symbol of more sombre things. They are light as a sign of our hope for peace amid the darkness of conflict. They are lit to express our fervent prayer for those who are ill. They are lit to remember those who have died. All actions we do weekly here at St Paul's.

So, as you light candles after communion this Candlemas, remember that we have come to a turning point in our symbolic journey through the Christian year. We turn from contemplating the coming of the light into the world at Christmas, the coming that was made possible through the co-operation of the little people like Mary and Joseph, and was proclaimed by the little people, like the shepherds and Simeon and Anna.

We turn from the light towards the darkness: the darkness that Simeon spoke of when he warned Mary of the pain that was to come, like a sword piercing her heart; and when he spoke of the judgement and the fall of many that would be precipitated by Jesus' presence. The darkness represented in the church's calendar by the sombre furnishings and bare flower stands of Lent that starts in just over a month. The darkness of temptation and opposition, of betrayal, torture and death, represented by the complete absence of colour and of candles on the Good Friday altar.

But, as Christians, we do not lose sight of the light as we make that turn towards the darkness. A Spanish rock group, Mago de Oz has a song with the words: "When you hear a boy ask why the sun comes and goes, tell him because there is no light without the dark." As the darkest season of the Christian year approaches, the light of Christ continues to guide us. As John assures us in the Prologue to his gospel read on Christmas Day: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*".

We are people of the resurrection, and we know that, beyond the darkness of Good Friday comes the glorious light of Easter, when we shall rekindle the candles extinguished on Maundy Thursday from the great light of the Paschal Candle.

When we are baptised, we are signed with the cross, and we are handed a small candle, the symbol of the light of Christ. We commit ourselves then to following that light all our days. Each time we hold a lighted candle in our hands, or light a candle in the candle-stand, we have an opportunity to re-commit ourselves to following the light, and to sharing the light with the world. So, as we turn from the lights of Christmas to the lights of Easter, let us ask God to help us in that commitment:

Eternal God, whose Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, is proclaimed as the Light of the World; may your people, guided, warned and warmed by the light of your word and sacraments, shine with the radiance of his glory, that you may be known, worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Adapted from <http://preacherwoman.wordpress.com/2009/02/01/light-a-sermon-for-candlemas/>