

Candlemas: A Light to the Nations

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40



Every morning now, light peeps through the curtains a little bit earlier. Every evening, the sun sets a little bit later. The increase in daylight brings signs of spring: sap rising, new energy, the assurance, even in a long winter, even in the midst of a pandemic, that life will not be extinguished.

'Let there be light': those are the first words spoken by God in the Bible. 'And there was light, and God saw that it was good.' Good – for life cannot exist without light. Even moles and earthworms and creatures at the bottom of the oceans could not survive without the warming of our planet by the light of the sun. Without light, where is life? Without light, where is hope?

And without light, how do we find our way in the world? Literally so: if there is neither moonlight nor streetlamps it's hard to find your path home at night. But metaphorically too: from ancient times people have spoken of knowledge as 'enlightenment' and truth as 'vision'. And when our Messiah and Teacher comes to his world, he is greeted as 'a light to lighten the nations'.

God saw that the light was good. But can we bear the light? If you stare at the sun with the naked eye, it will eventually blind you. If you try to flee a prison camp, the searchlight will find you. So in the height of summer we seek out shade; for darkness can in fact be safer and more comfortable.

Can we bear the light of truth, bear the light of Christ? 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple,' wrote the prophet. 'But who can endure the day of his coming ...? For he is like a refiner's fire ...' That fiery torch pierces the darkness, it uncovers the deeds the world endeavours to hide.

And this Jesus, greeted by Simeon as Light of the World, he will utter words and perform actions that disturb and judge – as still they do, if we read the gospels at all alertly. Jesus, who is presented in the holy Temple in this benign family scene, will return to the same Temple, armed with a whip of cords and overturning the tables. This light to the nations is a piercing light.



For centuries the Church has celebrated this feast with the lighting and procession of candles. Now that we no longer depend on candles for domestic light, we often associate them with comfort and fragrance, with what the Danes call *hygge*. But I'm not sure this is such a cosy feast day. The point of the Candlemas procession is to praise God for the light of truth and judgment that comes into the world with Jesus; to shed that pure and searching light into the dark corners of our Christian temples and of our own souls.

Jesus' own life embodies this light. He is not some celestial star to be admired from afar, but *our brother man*. 'Presented in substance of our flesh', as today's collect has it; tempted just as we are, as we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews; 'he grew and became strong, filled with wisdom,' says St Luke – just as we are called to. But he is also, in Simeon's words, 'a sign that will be opposed'. For humanity seeks the shade, shields its eyes from the light of truth and judgment. Those with worldly power crucify the Lord of light, and 'there was darkness over the whole land'.

But we are here because the light overcomes the darkness. It is the third day, and with the dawn Christ is raised, and our eyes have seen God's salvation. With candles, with words, with bread and wine, with commitment to truth, with patient love of our neighbour, let us join the procession. And within it we do not just see the light of Christ, we are *lit up* by it; not just lit up, but privileged to *shed* that precious light in all the darkness of our afflicted world.

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