

Luke 2:22-40

Candlemas

(3-2-13)

Today it's forty days from Christmas, the time when Jesus was born. Today we remember one of the first things in Jesus' life, something that happened not long after he was born. We call it 'Candlemas' when we remember how Joseph and Mary took baby Jesus to say thank you to God in the Temple in Jerusalem. There they met two old people, Simeon and Anna. They both saw the baby and said thank you to God for him too. Simeon said that Jesus was like 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' which is why we often light candles on this day to remind us of Simeon's words.

The world pays no attention to this day, it has no commercial significance: there's no money to be made from it! Yet it is momentous in recalling it was when Jesus was proclaimed to be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. Jesus came to show us, and teach us about the good things of God and to destroy the things of darkness. That's why he called himself the Light of the World, and why we celebrate today and remember the time when His light was first seen and recognised by other people.

When we see a new baby we've no idea what its life will hold – become prime-minister or play for England? Unusually expressing idle but loving comments. Simeon's words were different though. Although it seems a long time since Christmas this is our last opportunity to look back at the infant Jesus. Simeon's words tell us that he is no ordinary baby. This baby is the light of God's salvation, a light for all the world. But, even as we look back at the baby, Simeon also says words to Mary that make us look forward to the cross. He gives the first hint that the way to salvation is not going to be easy. He tells Mary that Jesus is going to challenge people and cause her sadness.

Today we are looking back at the baby and looking forward to the man he will be. We turn from crib to cross. (In church the crib is dismantled and replaced with a representation of the Temple with cross and a candle)

The season of Epiphany has shown us who Jesus, this baby lying in a manger, is. In ordinary terms, the birth of Jesus was the unremarkable birth of an infant in a small out of the way town.

Initially what made this birth different was that it was proclaimed by angels. Secondly, the only people who saw the angels were the shepherds who were the first people invited to come and see Jesus.

The remarkable thing about the birth is that it shows that God has come for the ordinary people, the poor and downtrodden. Even the mention of swaddling bands highlight this. The all-powerful majestic creator of the world allows Himself to be *restricted* - a sign that the divine nature had now been concealed in the new born.

There's the symbolism too between the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a borrowed manger, with the body of Jesus the man, wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a borrowed tomb. Bands, strips of cloth travelers wore round their waist to be wrapped in at death.

Then there were the wise men two years later – the non-Jews, the rich, the educated. Their gifts as clues to who Jesus is: a king, to be worshipped, to die. They bow down to this toddler and offer gifts.

Those stories took us from Christmas to the beginning of Epiphany on 6th January. Epiphany is like the light bulb that pops up over the head of a cartoon character is lighting up here. This little boy is very special. So much so that people want to kill him. Their visit swiftly followed by a massacre showing the threat that Jesus posed to earthly rulers.

Since then the remaining four weeks of Epiphany has been a 'making sense' time. A time when we've used our hearts and minds to look through the Bible at the stories that show who this Jesus is.

The boy in the Temple – Jesus stayed behind – His parents looked for Him amongst His family and friends returning from Jerusalem – but He tells His parents that He was in His *Father's* house.

Then came His baptism in the river. All sorts of clues here: John saying this is the One more

powerful who is coming; a dove coming down and settling on a young man of about thirty and the voice from heaven: 'You are my son, the Beloved'

Then we met the same young man at a wedding and lots of water being changed into wine. The significance here is really important. The water was in the jars of water used for purification. It shows the old ways of worshipping God are about to be changed from the formal Jewish rituals to the blood of Christ being shed.

Last week saw this same young man go to church (synagogue - literally "gathering-together-places,"). He read Isaiah 61 - a key passage in the Jew's salvation story which talks of their longed for Messiah coming to set them free. They long for a hero-king to set them free. Jesus told them that this prophecy is fulfilled in their presence. He is the One.

In those few verses Luke announced Jesus' ministry as the fulfilment of God's salvation, set out Jesus' job description (based on the Isaiah prophecy) and gave hints of Jesus' final suffering and rejection.

He went on to tell them that Israel was neither ready nor fit for its deliverance, and it would be given to the Gentiles. Everyone in the synagogue was filled with rage and drove him out of town.

They didn't listen as He interpreted the scriptures about Himself. Their lenses were opaque because their minds were closed. This was Joseph's son, not the great hero they wanted. This was not what they longed for or understood. Who precisely are the poor, captive, blind and oppressed to whom the good news is preached? It was of course them but they hadn't experienced a real epiphany.

Have we? We've spent Epiphany looking at who this baby really is. This ends now with today's reading taking us back to the baby Jesus as Mary takes Him to the Temple, as was the custom, 40 days after His birth. This was as purification for herself and for the purpose of redeeming Him. First born males had to be given back to God and then bought back with a sacrifice (2 doves).

Two very old and devout prophets in the Temple, Simeon and Anna see, and know, exactly who this baby is. They know that God has sent Him to save all people: to be a light for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. That's one of the reasons today is called Candlemas as we think of Jesus being the light.

But we also hear that this child's future is predicted to involve suffering. Consequently we need to see Him for who He really is, we need to put the baby away on this last Sunday in the churches season of Christmas. Next week begins the period of looking forward towards Easter. We turn from crib to cross.

Do we recognize Him now as the man? Are we any different to those Jews who heard who He was and tried to throw Him out? It's easy for us to be the poor, captive, blind and oppressed. Have we fully understood that God Himself became that vulnerable, weak, tied-up baby? That power lies in humble service?

Did we understand that changing water into wine was about the changing of old religious rituals into Christ personally pouring out His blood for us? God became man to be relevant to people living in the world – and for us that means the world today.

Simeon and Anna were old but they didn't live in the past. They both would've had lots to complain about but they were positive about the future. Neither of them were moaners. We're told the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon. The same Holy Spirit that wants to lead us into the future too. The challenge for each of us is to put our trust in God in the same complete way that Simeon and Anna did.

Like Simeon, we must have the faith to trust and recognise God has a plan for his world and is at work in His world. We must like Anna be able to look to the dawning of a new age. We do not know what lies around the corner but we should know that God has not abandoned us in the dark

As Simeon says, this child is the light of the world. Today we are the ones who have to show Him. Show Him so other people can have their light bulb moment - their own epiphany. All of us have a part to play in taking forward the salvation story and showing that light in the world.

One way for us to do that is to take the passage about agape love in 1 Corinthians 13 and really live it by replacing the word 'love' with 'I':

I am patient; I am kind; I am not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. I do not insist on its own way; I am not irritable or resentful; I do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Go, shine as a light!