

Candlemas Hebrews 2. 14 - end and Luke 2. 22 - 40

Candlemas is, for me, the last of the celebrations of Christmas which go through Christmastide, on to Epiphany and are completed in this festival of Candlemas. Yes, today is still about Christmas. Oh, I know we are asked to "do" Christmas nowadays - do the presents, the turkey, the decorations; do the religious bits with nativities and carol services and the midnight mass. But, after all that doing, which I think is unavoidable and some of it is very good, we have plenty of time simply to be- to pay attention to the child that has been born. To be aware of God enmeshed in the world - incarnate.

So here we are in our final story of the infant Jesus. For many this is a minor story, slightly off centre and filled with minor characters - just shows how wrong you can be. We have had a myriad of unnamed characters - shepherds, the innkeeper, hosts of angels and the ever popular but unnamed (in the Bible) magi. But here, in our so called minor characters we have names- Simeon and Anna and even Anna's father, Phanuel.

Simeon and Anna have not been busy. We know little of them - they appear for this episode and we never hear of them again - except for the memory echoing down the ages. Simeon, was righteous- he lived ethically, with integrity and in relationship with God. He was devout. He was waiting - for "the consolation of Israel."

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" - words from Isaiah that would have lived in the heart and mind of Simeon as he waited for the Messiah, come to save all people and promised by God. The Holy Spirit had inspired Simeon with the knowledge that he would not die until he had seen his Messiah. We don't know how long he had had this knowledge or how long he had waited. We think of him as being old but we do not know that that was so. Did he have a quickening of expectation as the spirit led him into the temple courts that day? Did he know the baby Jesus was the Messiah before he held him in his arms? How did he see the future salvation for all humanity in this one little baby boy?

T.S.Elliot, in his poem "Song for Simeon" catches the mystery of it all.

"Now at this birth season of deace
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word
Grant Israel's consolation
For one who has eighty years and no tomorrow."

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph are following all the Jewish laws governing the birth of a new born boy. Jesus is named and circumcised on the eighth day. He is brought to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord and his mother Mary follows the law of purification as they sacrificed the two young doves of pigeons. There is an intermingling of ritual in the telling of the story in Luke imitating the intermingling of *God* in our lives in, not always, the tidiest of ways! It is while these duties were being carried out that Simeon holds the baby and rejoices in his song often known as the Nunc Dimittis. I always have the Book of Common Prayer translation in my head "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." The newer translations use the word "dismiss". Rather like a soldier who has been on watch asks to be dismissed. But which ever is used the understanding is not of Simeon deciding to depart but of Simeon asking *God* if he can go home now. He has been watching under the command of *God*. His words are for *God* and for Mary. The words recognise Jesus as a light, a saving light for everyone. And there is wisdom there too as Simeon goes beyond the good news to the darkness of the journey. "...a sword will pierce your own soul" He says to Mary, preparing her and reminding us all that the journey into light does not follow a straight, unerring line.

And as our minds ponder these onerous words Anna appears. Anna, whose name means grace, living in solitude and likely poverty - with grace. Anna, a woman and a prophetess; I think remarkable on its own in a male dominated society. She must have been a woman of some learning and called upon, we can imagine, by the crowds of ordinary people who came to the temple. Maybe she was more approachable than the scribes for the poor people, like Mary and Joseph, who came faithfully but maybe a little fearfully to the impressive temple in the city of Jerusalem. Anna, who slips out of the story as swiftly as she enters it, is so important that not only is she named but her father is and her ancestors. Her father is Phanuel. Her immediate family are a remnant from the tribe of Asher which, when Joshua divided the promised land, received a portion of land in the north by the

Mediterranean. There the tribe of Asher dwelt and prospered alongside the Canaanites and seemed to have lost their Jewish identity as when, some years later, another prophetess called upon all the tribes of Israel to fight against Jabin the King of Canaan the Asher tribe refused and stayed by the sea. After that they disappear from the Biblical scene - well almost. There is Anna.

Anna, widowed since a young woman and staying in the precincts of the temple, but worshipping and fasting all her days. She never left the temple. Was she waiting too? I think so. She was waiting on God, prepared for whatever may be presented and what was presented was the Christ child. Maybe her concern was the freeing of Jerusalem, as she is described as telling all "who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" about the child. Did she see him as a Messianic hero? However she saw Jesus she gave thanks and toldshe was excited and moved. She had found what she had waited for.

The telling of this happening ends with the words
"and the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him."

Three qualities that he met on this day of enormous significance in the temple. He met the strength of those who wait, in faith, prepared to have the world do unto them rather than mark the world with their footprint. He met the wisdom of Simeon as he rejoiced and courageously turned the face of Mary to the future. And he met the grace of a woman called Anna, who thanked God and went out and told.

There was a time when I would have given my eye teeth to be able to wait. I had twin sons who were 4 years old and a baby daughter. I idolised them all but it was always particularly frantic picking the boys up from nursery, negotiating push chairs as well as baby and toddler seats in the car. It was all lifting, pushing, watching, sweating. Karen was gorgeous and the teachers would often ask to hold her. One day they held her, I walked the boys to the car, got in and was just driving off when I remembered - "the baby!" Back to nursery we rushed!

I can leave God behind now; running around doing the essential things, I can have God with me and then take my eye off what really matters and I am

gone without him. It's a bit like pulling your tummy in to support your knees - keeping that relationship with God always part of the support for the whole of yourself. Within the activity we need to wait, be watching for God, responding to him; and sometimes we need simply to stop, altogether, and be still. Like this.....

Amen.

Candlemas

It is actually on the 2nd February but we are celebrating it today.

Day commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the temple - following the Jewish laws for a first born son and for a mother just having given birth.

It is also a day when traditionally the candles of the church were blessed - but not in the place where the mass was to be held.

Also a day when weather is predicted:

"If candlemas be fair and bright
Come winter, have another flight,
If Candlemas brings cloud and rain
Go winter and come not again."

Collect

All-powerful Father,
Christ your Son became man for us
and was presented in the temple.
May he free our hearts from sin
and bring us into your presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen

The Liturgy of the Hours

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace,
your word has been fulfilled:
My own eyes have seen the salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of every people:
a light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people Israel.

From Christian Prayer, commonly said at Candlemas