

JESUS COMES TO THE TEMPLE

Introduction

Here are some more sayings about Candlemas which are particularly drawn from farming folklore: On Candlemas Day if a thorn be adrop/You can be sure of a good pea crop. A thorn adrop is an icicle. ...A farmer on Candlemas Day/should have half his corn and half his hay. Winter is not more than half passed. But what was the origin of this feast and what do we celebrate?

Origins

As with many Christian festivals there is a mixture of pagan and purely Christian. Many of the Christian festivals picked up on the seasons of nature and used the times of the year to reinforce something meaningful from the Christian calendar. 2nd February is Candlemas Day and is a cross-quarter day in the old Celtic calendar. Quarter days are festivals that fall near the end of each quarter of the year and a cross-quarter day is the mid-point between the two. So 2nd February is half-way between Christmas and Lady Day on 25th March. (Feast of the Annunciation). But there are ancient Christian origins to the feast which are to do with celebrating an important event in the life of Jesus and his mother Mary. So Candlemas' more scriptural title is the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The earliest records of this observance date from the 4th Century and it is and is one of the oldest Christian festivals apart from Easter itself. It used to be on 14th February but when the birth of Christ began to be celebrated on 25th December, it was moved to 2nd February because that is 40 days after Christmas. On this day, not only was Jesus presented in the Temple but Mary was obliged under Jewish law to be purified after his childbirth. Some of the older generation may remember the churching of women, which was a ritual that helped a mother re-enter normal society and life after giving childbirth. These days we don't like the implications of this – there is nothing more wonderful than giving birth and certainly not anything that should be connected with being ritually unclean. Another origin, which helps to explain its popular name, is that all the candles that were to be used that year were brought to church to be blessed. In days before electricity, candles would have been an important part of everyday life and not just the pretty decorations we use nowadays!

What do we celebrate?

Those were the origins of Candlemas, but what exactly are we celebrating? Well, I would like to suggest that it can mean three things. First, it is a way of marking time, a way of moving on in the Christian year. Secondly, it is a celebration of light countering the darkness. Thirdly, it is about the old welcoming the young, especially Simeon and Anna welcoming the infant Jesus.

Marking time

The Christian year is something that we perhaps grow to appreciate more as we grow older. We begin to see connections between the main festivals, that they are not isolated occasions, but take their place as a gradually developing progression. So today we take one last look at Christmas and begin to turn our thoughts to Lent, Holy Week and Easter. Today we mark 40 days after the birth of Christ and it brings the whole Christmas and Epiphany season to it close. That is why we keep the crib scene up until Candlemas, since Candlemas is also a celebration of the baby Jesus and those who welcomed him into our world. In the days before calendars and computers, timepieces and timetables, people lived much more by the light, the lengths of days and ways of measuring time that were not mechanical or printed on paper. Candlemas, as we have already noted, is a cross-quarter day, a point which lies roughly half way between the winter solstice (the shortest day) and the spring equinox (when the length of day and night is the same). We mark the Christian seasons with different colours, different decorations or the removal of them, and certain things we include or leave out of our worship (like the Gloria in Advent and Lent). God has placed us in a world of space and time, and so to mark the passing of time is a way of accepting and celebrating how God has made our universe. Living with the rhythm of the seasons and the Christian year helps to sustain our faith and reminds of different aspects of the life of Christ.

Light Countering the Darkness

Simeon's song, known by the words that open it in the Latin version, Nunc dimittis, includes the line: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel. Simeon recognised that in this child was the light of the world. He and Anna celebrated the Messiah who had come to banish the darkness of sin, suffering and injustice. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that it was because Jesus came as a human being that he was able to break the power of sin as he withstood temptation and died on the cross for us. When we remember Jesus, a helpless baby and then a child who had to grow up as slowly as any human being, and dependent on his parents just as any other child, we reaffirm our belief that he was fully human.

Indeed, he needed to be fully human in order to save us. Though he was also fully divine, and that is why he didn't sin, even though he was human, he didn't take advantage of it. He went through what we have to go through and that is why he understands what it is like to be human. In ordinary life that makes sense, I think. For instance, although I took funerals when I was a young curate, I never really knew what it was like to be bereaved until I suffered my own personal losses of very close loved ones. Hebrews says: Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. We celebrate Jesus the light come to banish the darkness in different ways throughout the year. We have Christingles at Christmas and the Easter fire at dawn and then the lighting of the Paschal Candle at Easter time. We enjoy Glow in the Dark at Halloween. Today we celebrate the light that came to the Temple and was welcomed by Simeon and Anna who had been waiting all their lives for that special moment. Simeon said he could die a happy man now that he had seen the Saviour. One wonders what Mary and Joseph would have thought! After the shepherds and wise men had said such amazing things about their baby, perhaps the penny was beginning to drop. We certainly know Mary stored all these things up in memory bank and treasured them.

Old welcomes the young

One of the things that has often struck me about Jesus' presentation in the Temple was how young he was and how old Simeon and Anna were. Jesus was barely 6 weeks' old. The first ritual a Jewish baby boy would have was his circumcision when he was only 8 days old. But that could be done at home. When Mary and Joseph came to the Temple it seems they were rolling two rituals into one. Mary came to be purified but they also brought Jesus to be redeemed or bought back. The idea of that came from the Exodus. The first born of anything someone had was to be presented to the Lord as a reminder that the Lord had saved all the firstborn in the Passover when the children of Israel escaped their slavery in Egypt. The most important things in the life of a family were to be reminders of the most important thing in the life of their people – their identity as the Chosen People was as Exodus People. If you were poor, you were allowed a concessionary rate for buying back your firstborn and that is what Mary and Joseph were doing. So Jesus was almost 7 weeks old and he was met and blessed by Simeon who was old enough to be ready to die. Anna, Luke tells us, was 84 which must have been a terrific age in those days! How these two OAP's rejoiced in Jesus as they held him in their arms and praised God! They recognised in this little infant the future good of the whole world, although they also realised how costly this was going to be for them.

What we learn

There is much for us to take away and ponder from today's celebration and the scripture readings. One of the challenges we face here at St James is the relationship of the old and the young. It is a good challenge to have and we are very fortunate to have such a good cross-section of members. But the old and the young don't always find it so easy to get along with each other. Each have their own needs: the young need to explore, have fun, use up their energy and don't always behave in ways which are acceptable. The old like a bit of peace and quiet, they like to be able to concentrate on their worship and know that special times in the service or special parts of the church will be undisturbed. In between are the parents who feel torn between giving their children freedom and realise how their children can sometimes give the older members difficulties. We are all family, and so we have to learn a bit of give and take. How terrible it would be for either the young or the old to feel pushed out of church for it belongs to all of us! Those of us entrusted with leading and looking after our church are trying to find a way that will help everyone feel they belong and can be happy here. The young are not always angels and the old can sometimes forget what it is like to bring up young children in today's world. But we can recognise Christ in each other, we can welcome each other and we can celebrate the light that comes into all of our lives and saves us.