

Night Prayer

February 2022: From Candlemas to Lent

With one foot in Christmas, the other in
Easter



Candlemas (Feb 2) is the final end of Christmas celebrations and the first celebration of Spring. Ash Wednesday (March 3) marks the beginning of Lent, This means that all the Sundays of February this year are in what the Church delightfully calls 'Ordinary Time'. We shall explore this notion of 'the ordinary' in Crossing Place on Feb 20th.

These four weeks may be 'ordinary' but they take us on a significant journey which reveals more about the nature of Christ. We move from two further affirmations that this baby is indeed the promised Messiah through the calling of the first disciples, the sermon on the mount and the transfiguration from which Jesus, having descended from the mountain top, sets his face towards Jerusalem and Easter.

However, because there is much to reflect over from the events celebrated at Candlemas, we shall stay with them for the February Night Prayer.

If you wish to light a candle, now would be an appropriate time, and you might say:

Let the flame of your love never be quenched in our hearts, O Lord. Waking or sleeping, living or dying, let us delight in your presence. Let the flame of your love brighten our souls and illumine our path, and let the majesty of your glory be our joy, our life and our strength now and for ever. Amen *Johann Arndt, 1555-1621*

Candlemas

Down with the rosemary and bays,
Down with the mistletoe;
Instead of holly, now up-raise
The greener box, for show.

The holly hitherto did sway;
Let box now domineer,
Until the dancing Easter-day,
Or Easter's eve appear.

Excerpt from 'Ceremonies for Candlemas Eve' Robert Herrick 1591-1674.

So finally we are leaving Christmas behind, although most of us will have removed all decorations and any holly or Christmas trees almost as soon as we were in January.

But before we move on let us recall the Christmas message does not end here.

We pray

A sparkling star
guided foreigners to see what neighbours could not.

Open our hearts, merciful God,
to the sparks of your presence still in this world.
Open our eyes,
that we might behold your presence in the least likely of places,
and among the least likely of people.

God with us,
kindle your spark within us,
that together we may shine forth your light,
we might banish the shadows of this world,
we might be the continuation of the Christmas miracle:
Emmanuel is in this world,
God is with us, now and evermore.

(From a longer prayer by Rev. Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, Pastor at First Church Congregational in Rochester, NH.)

Call to confession

Jesus said:
'I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me shall never walk in darkness
but shall have the light of life.'
Let us therefore bring our sins into his light
and confess them in penitence and faith.

Lord Jesus, illuminate the darkness in our hearts
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus open our eyes to your saving love
Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, unstop our ears to hear your living word
Lord, have mercy.

May almighty God have mercy on us,
forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
(From a service for Candlemas Day 2021. Church of England website.)

The other names for Candlemas day are the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. These events are recorded in Luke 2: 22-30.

We think of this as the story involving Simeon and Anna – two people who have been waiting – marking time if you like, through their prayers and participation in the life of the Temple at Jerusalem. How long will they have to wait until God fulfils what has been promised? Could it be today?

Collect for the Day—Before we read, we pray

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty, whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple, in substance of our flesh: grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts, by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. (*Common Worship*)

Reading Luke 2: 22-30. NRSV but King James Version for the 'Nunc Dimittis'

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

³⁰ For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

³¹ Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

³² A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, '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 a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak

about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Worship song

We are going to hear a version of the Song of Simeon also known as Nunc Dimittis (from the opening phrase in Latin) which many will remember was sung most weeks at Evensong. This version is from Nigel, sung by the choir at St David's at their Candlemas Service in 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rDnLhgBxO0>

A Candlemas Prayer

Lord God, you are the source of everlasting light.
Your son, our beloved Lord Jesus
was presented in the temple forty days after his birth.

He was recognised by Simeon and Anna,
and welcomed as the promised Messiah.
May we like them, behold the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Grant that we may stand before you
with hearts cleansed by your forgiving love.

May we serve you all our days
and make your name known
as we worship you as our Lord.

So may we come by your grace
to eternal life. Amen.

Reflection

The essential message of this event is to show both Christ's (and Mary's) humanity, in that they are both undergoing the same rituals as any other Jewish child and mother would have done, but also through the words of Simeon and Anna, Christ is revealed to be the divine means of bringing salvation to the world.

Purification

Mary is coming to the temple in accordance with the Jewish Law (from Leviticus 12) forty days after birth of her son, to offer a sacrifice and be declared ritually pure, and therefore free to be active again in society. It is ironic to our eyes that the person who has given birth

to the world's saviour is impure as a result. The offering prescribed is a year-old lamb, but failing that, two specified birds. Mary and Joseph chose the latter option, suggesting they cannot afford the lamb.

Here is a comment on this element of the events from Ælfric, a late tenth century monk who became abbot of Eynsham Abbey. We may not see entirely eye to eye with him today, but it still worth-while reflecting on this thousand-year-old view of the significance of this action.

'A little thing was a lamb, or two turtle-doves, to bring to God; but God does not consider a man's offering so much as he considers his heart. God has no need of our possessions; all things are his, in heaven, and earth, and sea, and all the things which dwell in them, but he gave earthly things to mankind to enjoy, and commanded them that with those earthly things they should acknowledge him who first gave them, not for his need, but for their need. If you acknowledge your Lord with your possessions, according to your ability, it will help you towards eternal life; if you forget him, it harms you, not God, and you will lose your eternal reward.'

Prayer (*adapted from the Catholic Novena in preparation for the Feast of the Purification*)

Virgin most obedient, at your presentation in the temple you did will, like other women, to offer the appointed sacrifice: may we too, following your example, learn how to offer ourselves a living sacrifice to God, by practicing every virtue.



Images of the purification tend to focus on the presentation of Jesus, rather than the offering of the birds.

However in this version we at least see Joseph (presumably) holding two birds just above Mary's head, which makes them appear to be sitting there!

Illustration from the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, a tenth century manuscript, produced in Winchester.

Presentation

As Jesus is Mary's first-born son he is also under Jewish law to be dedicated to God. This is where Simeon comes in, and led, so Luke tells us, by the Holy Spirit. In the early Christian Greek-speaking world the feast was called Hypapanti (the encounter) – the encounter between the baby Jesus and the old man Simeon. The optimistic words of Simeon could be expressing his hope for someone with a new determination to do better, but it is not just a passing all of our hopes onto a new generation – in the hope that somehow they'll do better (they won't). There is a changing of the guard here. The new will replace the old. It may not have been the salvation Simeon was expecting, the vindication of a particular people, but he sees instead something far greater - salvation for all people. So he feels he can indeed die in peace: the future he foresees is safe in this baby's hands.

But Simeon finishes with some disturbing words. However marvellous salvation through Jesus may be, it creates problems. Not everyone will take kindly to Jesus. The sword of Jesus will divide, discriminate, and judge the thoughts, attitudes, and relationships of all people. Even Mary the mother of Jesus will go through the same crisis. Everyone must decide what to do with Jesus.

We pray

O Lord Jesus Christ, as a child you were presented in the Temple and received with joy by Simeon and Anna as Redeemer of Israel: mercifully grant that we like them, may be guided by the Holy Spirit to acknowledge and love you until the end of our lives. Amen
(Church of South India)

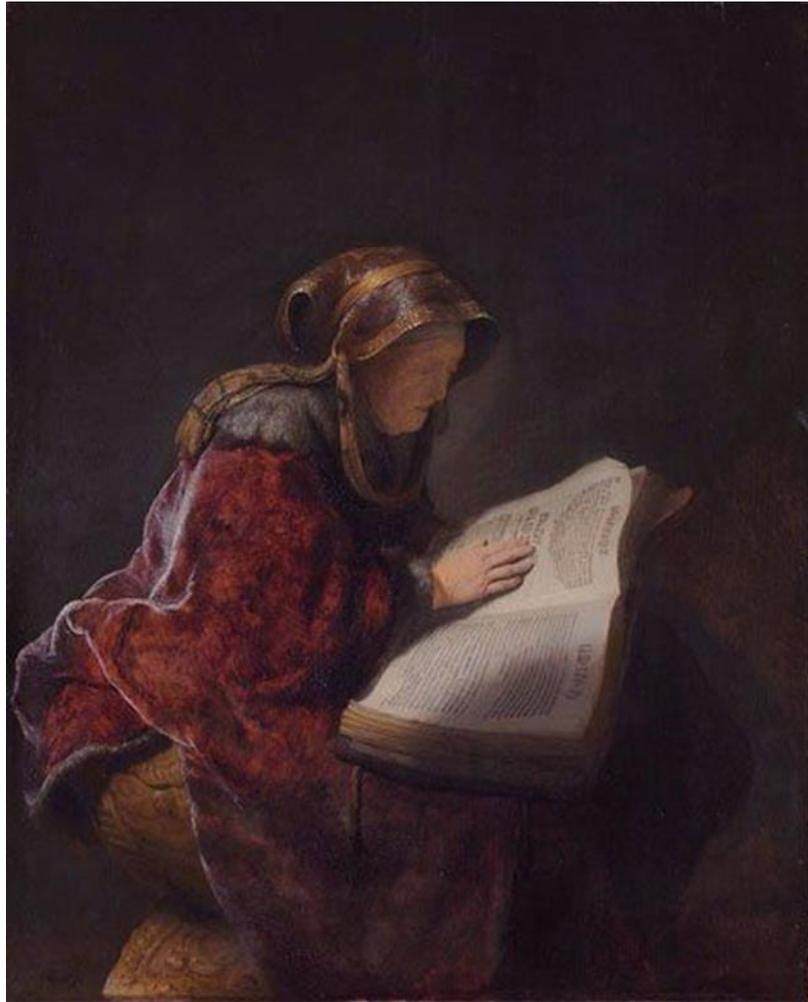
Worship song

The Nunc Dimittis, music by Gustav Holst, sung here by Voces 8 at the Cathedral of Vaison-la-Romaine, Provence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GE159jxkWWM>

Anna the Prophet

Up to this point it could be claimed that the only people to whom Jesus had been revealed as someone special were all male. Luke did not have to include this brief comment about Anna, but he does, showing that 'all people' means more than some dominant group.



Old woman reading, probably the prophetess Anna, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1631, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The woman used as the model for this painting is thought to be Rembrandt's mother and she appears in another painting. However, it has been generally agreed that she is here to represent Anna and this is how the Rijksmuseum officially records it.

The details in the painting create the suggestion that this is Anna. The woman is reading Scripture and the letters on the pages are in Hebrew, although they cannot be read as text. Notice too her hands which are wrinkled and carefully painted to make plain to the viewer that this woman is really old, and correspondingly full of wisdom.

It is her hand which is illuminated and not her face, because the light falls directly upon the pages of scripture. This is where the significance lies, not in the portrait of the woman herself. She is drawing attention to the word of God, as any prophet should.

We pray

Anna had lived for decades as a widow. In an age without medicine, state support or a pension she found the hope and resilience to remain faithful in her vigil and joyful in proclamation of a God who keeps his promises.

May God give to us hearts equally full of joy to overcome the dark times and proclaim the light of Christ which has come into the world.

Worship song

The Nunc Dimittis sung here by Ischia, the BBC young chorister of the year 2018 and accompanied by David Blackadder, Royal Trumpeter. The performance was dedicated as a gift to celebrate the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMNs9O55tpk>

Candlemas – the first festival of Spring

Candlemas occurs half-way between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. This was also an important time in pre-Christian worship and in the Celtic pagan calendar was called Imbolc. Winter stores of food were getting low so Imbolc rituals were performed to harness divine energy that would ensure a steady supply of food until the harvest six months later.

Like many Celtic festivals, the Imbolc celebrations centred around the lighting of fires. Fire was perhaps more important for this festival than others as it was also the holy day of Brigid, the Goddess of fire, healing and fertility. The lighting of fires celebrated the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months. For the Christian calendar, this holiday was reformed and renamed 'Candlemas' when candles are lit to remember the purification of the Virgin Mary.

Let's hear Abbot Ælfric again about the ritual.

'Be it known also to everyone that it is appointed in the custom of the church that on this day we should carry our lights to church, and let them be blessed there: and that we should go afterwards with that light among the houses of God, and sing the hymn appointed for that. Though some people cannot sing, they can nevertheless bear the light in their hands; for on this day was the true Light, Christ, borne to the temple, who redeemed us from darkness and will bring us to that eternal light, who lives and rules for ever without end.'

Intercessions

We pray to the Father through Christ who is our light and life.

Father, your Christ is acclaimed as the glory of Israel:

look in mercy on your Church, sharing his light.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Father, your Christ in his temple brings judgement on the world:
look in mercy on the nations, who long for his justice.
Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Father, your Christ, who was rich, for our sakes became poor:
look in mercy on the needy, suffering with him.
Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Father, your Christ is the one in whom faithful servants find their peace:
look in mercy on the departed that they may see your salvation.
Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Father, your Christ is revealed as the one destined to be rejected:
Look in mercy on us who now turn towards his passion.
Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Lord God, you kept faith with Simeon and Anna,
and showed them the infant King.
Give us grace to put all our trust in your promises,
and the patience to wait for their fulfilment;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers,
for the sake of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus Christ, light of the nations and glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God. Amen.
(From a service for Candlemas Day 2021. Church of England website.)

Blessing

May Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
fill us with radiance
and scatter the darkness from our path.

May Christ, the Sun of Righteousness,
gladden our eyes and warm our heart.

May Christ, the Dayspring from on high,
draw near to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
be among us and remain with us always. Amen

Closing hymn

No surprise – another version of the Nunc Dimittis this time as a chant sung as part of a short time of night prayer. This seems a right way to bring our Night Prayer to a close.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI9oPTBSviA>



Snowdrops - a sure sign that Spring is on its way.