

Sermon for Candlemas Eucharist, Eucharist
Malachi 3:1-5, Hebrews 2:14-end, Luke 2:22-40
Mother Emma

Across all human cultures and traditions, the image of light shining in the darkness is one of the most powerful and evocative.

I read recently that the light of a single candle, in a flat countryside or sea in total darkness, can be seen several miles away, as even at such a distance, its light can dispel the gloom.

Light speaks to us of hope – “the light at the end of the tunnel”; of rescue from irrational – or, indeed, rational – fears, as we are enabled to flood sinister or frightening places with light and see that there is nothing there; or of metaphorical clarity or “enlightenment”, as understanding dawns...

Most religions have some kind of Festival of Light or Lights; those who celebrate the Summer Solstice remind us of the joy of long days filled with light and warmth, Roman pagan culture celebrated the winter solstice as the time when the days began to lengthen, and the darkness to recede – and our word “Lent” originally derives from the Old English word for “lengthen”, as it coincides with the lengthening of the days towards the Spring.

The Feast we celebrate today has had many different names.

The traditional word “Candlemas”, contains echoes of the festival celebrated by this country’s pre-Christian population midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

Some of you will have heard me say before – but as the fact continues to entrance me year by year, I hope you will forgive me – that in Victorian times, the feast of Candlemas marked the final day on which the lamplighters went around lighting the streetlamps.

It was considered that by Candlemas, there was just enough light in the sky to see your way safely home at 5 pm, and every 2nd of February, I am thrilled to find that once again, this is indeed perfectly true.

Please do look up into the sky to see it for yourself this Wednesday and take the opportunity to give thanks for the Light of Christ, sent to enlighten each one of us!

Meanwhile, the traditional name for the feast, which is still found in Prayer Book Services is “The Purification of the Virgin Mary”.

In Old Testament times, it was proscribed that 40 days after a birth, women should come to the Temple in order to be purified following their recovery from the uncleanness of their confinement.

There may be those here today who still remember how right up until the twentieth century, the “churcing” of women was a common ritual to mark the end of the post-natal period, one which today has been replaced by the wholly secular “six week check up.”

Common Worship, our modern liturgy, now calls the Feast, “The Presentation of Christ in the Temple”, focussing on the fact that although Mary came to be purified, Joseph also brought his new son to present him to the Lord, and to make the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

It was during this ceremony that they would encounter the two aged people, Simeon and Anna, whose lives had been spent in anticipation of the coming of the promised Messiah, and who, we are told, saw in the baby Jesus, the fulfilment of all their hopes.

Simeon's words, recorded by Luke as one of the most beautiful Canticles in the Christian liturgical tradition, have been set to music and sung by countless musicians in worship throughout the centuries and make clear the link between the date chosen for us to remember this part of the narrative, and the Festival of Light which preceded it.

Simeon sees in the infant Christ, "A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to your people Israel", or as we hear in it in the traditional version, "To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel."

Light, as I began, represents hope and reassurance, safety and enlightenment, as it overcomes the power of darkness to oppress, to terrify or to conceal.

It can also be a thing of wonder and of glorious beauty, if we think of the stars, the sun, the mystery of the Northern Lights or the joyful effect of fireworks.

The coming of the Messiah promised all these things.

The star which led the Magi to the place of his birth lit up the sky to draw attention to his coming.

Simeon recognised that he would bring enlightenment to the Gentiles who ruled over them, as well as to those in other nations, demonstrating that the God worshipped by the people of Israel was indeed the Creator of the World, who held human history in the palm of his Fatherly hand.

He would enable people everywhere to experience the promises made through the Old Testament prophets – that the world would come to see, to understand and to worship, drawn by God's light.

Yet, today's texts also remind us of the use of the term "bring to light", as we heard in the Introduction to our Confession.

For those things we wish to conceal, the secrets of our hearts, the injustices of our society, the suffering of people we cannot bear to think about, can also be exposed by the same light which takes away our fears.

When Jesus declares, "I am the Light of the World", he means both that he comes to bring hope and joy and safety, but also that his light will shine into the darkest corners and force us to face up to our fears and failings.

As our first reading suggested, his light will be like that of a refiner's fire, which will purify us from greed and selfishness and inward-looking, so that we may all be fit to greet him when he comes again in glory.

To re-visit the words of today's Collect:

God our creator, who in the beginning commanded the light to shine out of darkness: we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, shine into the hearts of all your people, and reveal the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ.