

## Candlemas, Matins

Haggai 2:1-9, John 2:18-22

Father Christopher

The church should focus on religion, and keep its nose out of politics. That's a common sentiment in this country, particularly when bishops raise questions regarding refugees, housing and the way those in need are treated by the rest of society. And one might add, particularly on the current debate about gay marriage in church, that some in the church conversely wish politicians would stay out of the church's business.

Aside from our being the established church, and that rather going with the territory, it is important for those of us in the church to remember that not only do we not have a monopoly of the truth (shock, horror), we don't even have a monopoly of the Holy Spirit.

While at times people complain that the church looks like an extension of the Labour Party (if not perhaps over gay marriage), 100 years ago the church was described as 'the Tory party at prayer', and it is still in fact the case, according to polls, that more worshipping members of the Church of England vote Conservative than for another any party.

Of course, you have to be very careful in how you engage in political discourse if you're representing the church. It is important to focus on those in need and on issues rather than parties. But it is very clear from the Hebrew Bible - the Old Testament - that God has everything to do with politics. Just think of all of those kings doing oh so well and then sinning, or their successors sinning, before another good king comes in, and so on, and so on, one after the other.

In our first reading from Haggai, perhaps more familiar from Handel's Messiah:

*For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts. And from the psalms: 'The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it.'*

But what has any of this to do with Candlemas? Candlemas, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is about Mary and Joseph's purification and about their offering of a sacrifice to redeem their first-born son. These rituals are surely a world away from all that we know, particularly our politics.

The Temple itself was destroyed in AD 70, and Judaism was to change radically as a result, no longer being centred on Temple worship, but instead around the teaching of rabbis and worship in the synagogue. The Temple, as the place in which all holiness was centred, was to come to an end. And so, what does Jesus's presentation in the Temple mean to us today? You might think very little on the surface, just as the message about Jesus being the consolation of Israel is hard for us to comprehend as modern-day Christians. On one level, we believe that we are the new Israel, or that we are grafted into Israel. But what does the '*redemption of Jerusalem*' mean to us? One might focus on the message given by Simeon in the words we use at Evensong:

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

Rather than only reaching Jews, Jesus's message of salvation is also for the Gentiles. I think there is also something here about how what Jesus brings is not limited to the purely 'religious' world as we might think of it. Yes, Joseph and Mary have brought Him to the Temple, to make the customary offering, but the change He will bring about will be felt far beyond that world.

*'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'* Simeon told Mary.

So certainly not limited to what might be defined as the narrowly religious world of the Temple. But then if we draw too sharp a distinction between the narrow - to us, esoteric - world of the Temple, and, say, helping others, we are not being true to how the Temple was truly understood. Yes, like in church, the Holy of Holies, the Sanctuary, was a special place, only used for ritual purposes. But the Temple was also the centre of all Jewish life, just as all Jewish life flowed out of it.

*'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord [to the Temple], or who can rise up in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not lifted up their soul to an idol, nor sworn an oath to a lie.'* Your relationship with the Temple depended on your behaviour out there in the world. *'Lift up your heads, O gates; be lifted up, you everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.'*

The very building of the Temple will welcome in the righteous - the King of glory in particular - and this is what we see in Jesus's presentation in the Temple. In going out into the world in His later ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus will transform people in their hearts and in their actions.

Just as the ritual of the Temple was inseparable from the state of the people of Israel, so our religion today is inseparable from the conversion of life that it brings about in us in our everyday life. Just as we both bring the things of the world to church in prayer and worship; and go out again fed to continue our pilgrimage in the world.

Our fighting for justice for the weak, food for the poor and a home for the refugee are not therefore an add-on to what we do here in church. But they flow out of our liturgy (literally in the Greek, *'the work of the people'*); and we then return again bringing the burdens and pain which the world and our work place upon us, seeking rest and sustenance again to continue. And so, we go on, until our prayer, our worship and our service of God and neighbour - in the true, Good Samaritan sense of neighbour - becomes the rhythm of our life, and THAT as a whole is our religion, not just the one part that happens to be in church.

So, in answer to the question I began with, no, religion cannot be kept out of politics, and indeed I would go so far as to say that it is a sin to keep our religion out of politics. To repeat Simeon's words again: Jesus was destined to be *'a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.'* It is not for us to smooth over those differences between the values we stand for as Christians and those of the world, or indeed to smooth over differences within the church over how we live out our faith when such issues are at stake. Because as Micah put it, bringing worship and our action in the world together, our duty is *'to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.'*

For *'The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it.'* Amen