

**Sunday 1 February 2026, Candlemas Choral Evensong**  
**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

Down with the rosemary, and so  
Down with the bays and misletoe;  
Down with the holly, ivy, all  
Wherewith ye dress'd the Christmas hall;  
That so the superstitious find  
No one least branch there left behind;  
For look, how many leaves there be  
Neglected there, maids, trust to me,  
So many goblins you shall see.

Robert Herrick's little poem 'Ceremony Upon Candlemas Eve' captures what was once a cultural commonplace in England: the taking down at Candlemas of the Christmas greenery. In my house at least, this custom still obtains though the greenery is evergreen by virtue of being made of plastic. It goes away into the under-stairs cupboard until next Christmas Eve.

Much like the putting away of the greenery, the Feast of Candlemas itself marks a turning from one season in the Church's life to another. The tone shift is noticeable in Simeon's words to Mary, 'Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against.' This prophecy presages the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees which is to characterise his adult ministry.

Jesus is still a sign spoken against, especially by those for whom his words about kindness to strangers, defending the poor, and giving support to the vulnerable are not seen as words of blessing but as words commending forced societal reorganisation and welfare for the 'undeserving'. For some, the light of Christ casts an all-too uncomfortable spotlight on their own callous hearts.

The strong teaching of the adult Jesus is the thorn on the rose of his precious childhood. We can accept with joy the angelic announcement of 'goodwill towards men' when it is for ourselves; goodwill towards others can sometimes be more difficult. And this is doubly true when 'others' are not simply the unfortunate 'undeserving' but the actively wicked and malicious.

This was St Peter's problem when he came to Jesus asking, 'Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' He wanted to know the limit of human charity and he discovered that, to quote my favourite film of 2004, *Mean Girls*, 'the limit does not exist.' 'Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.' Seven being the number of perfection, one should forgive in a multiple of ten that very perfection.

The turning that Candlemas represents is a hard turning. We move from Jesus' childhood to his adulthood, from the peace of his birth to the conflict of his ministry, from the general goodwill towards men to the specific goodwill that entails the forgiveness of personal slights and injuries.

In a very real sense, Candlemas is about growing up: our growing up into the real world beyond the pretty scene on the front of a Christmas card.

For Herrick, to leave behind even a leaf of the Christmas greenery was to invite goblins into one's house. I contend that the goblins were always there, hidden under the surface of the Christmas festal dressing. The goblins of our lives- callousness and lack of forgiveness among them- can only be kept at bay by shining the clear light of Christ into the darkest, most secretly kept, recesses of our hearts. And we must be grown-up about it. So consider the thorns of his adult teaching to be the wounds of a friend and let the perfume of Christ suffuse your life as the year turns, and as the Church turns from that gentle birth towards that dreadful cross and passion in which is truly our salvation. Amen.