

Candlemass 2021 Witney

Of all the Feasts of the Church, the one we are celebrating today has a good claim to be the most multi-faceted and the most complex in feeling. Its multi-facetedness is evident in the Feast's different names. In the Church of England these days I suppose the *official* name is 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple', though in the *Common Worship* listing, 'Candlemas' follows in brackets after Presentation of Christ in the Temple whilst in the *Book of Common Prayer* we find 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple commonly called – and this at least sometimes in larger print – 'The Purification of St Mary the Virgin.' In the Eastern Orthodox Church it is 'Hypapante', Meeting, a name which focuses the Feast on Simeon and Anna's meeting with Christ, as the Old meets the New. That coming together of the old and the new is part of what makes the feel of the Feast complex. In Luke old Simeon seems to acknowledge the new in Christ joyfully enough, yet there is something poignant too about his imminent departure having played his prophetic role. I think T.S. Eliot is picking up on this in his *Song for Simeon* where his Simeon figure – 'one who has eighty years and no-tomorrow' - looks towards to a future in which he does not feature:

According to thy word.

They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation

With glory and derision,

Light upon light, mounting the saints' stair.

Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,

Not for me the ultimate vision.

Grant me thy peace.

(And a sword shall pierce thy heart,

Thine also).

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,

I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.

Let thy servant depart,

Having seen thy salvation.

The exciting new beginning with its huge possibilities is one this Simeon, old as he is, can speak of, not live into; tired with his life and the lives of those after him, perhaps he doesn't even want to live into it. 'Not for me' might be as much refusal as recognition.

Refusal of the Christ-centred future is certainly raised as a possibility by the biblical Simeon: ‘This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.’ The joy of recognition and acknowledgement of Christ as the light of the world is here rather qualified by the troubling indication that some will not recognise and acknowledge him but will oppose him. Christ’s coming is joyous but also challenging and indeed threatening. For the falling, as well as the rising, of many in Israel. Christ as refiner’s fire, Christ, maybe as a sword of judgement separating good from bad, his friends from his enemies in the nation of Israel - maybe, too as a piercing sword seeking to cut out of our individual souls our opposition to him. Anyway, the sword image brings with it disturbing ideas of violence and pain associated with Christ. The baby in Simeon’s arms is not something to be cooed over sentimentally – for, as Mary Coleridge puts it in her poem *Salus Mundi*, not only is the Christchild the world’s safety – he is also the world’s danger.

And though other figures are greatly significant in this scene, at its centre is the Christchild and to him we must attend. I was introduced a while back to a Swedish hymn specially written some thirty years ago for Candlemas Day. *Kyndelsmässodagen*, clearly etymologically related to Candlemas Day, is what the Swedes call the Feast, but it’s worth noting that the *kyndel*- element in old Swedish means ‘torch’ or ‘flare’, - a stronger light than candles give, perhaps. Biblically enough for this day, but also very Swedishly (at this stage of their very dark and extended winter, the Swedes are longing for light) – the hymn speaks of light shining in darkness. ‘Children and stars are born in the dark’, it begins. The Christchild, as perhaps all children, is born as light in our darkness, all children, but Christ especially, being signs and bearers of hope. But with the hope comes challenge: ‘God is near in a little child who sees us’, ends the Swedish hymn’s refrain. Why that ‘who sees us’? The friend who sent me the hymn explains that it is to do with the specialness of the gaze of a very small child, something that for her has a piercing quality (that sword, again) in that, as she puts it, ‘You can’t protect yourself behind masks and excuses – the child sees through all fears and reservations’. She is no doubt drawing on her experiences with her own son who was born on Candlemas day. Does her explanation resonate, I wonder, with parents, perhaps mothers especially, present today?

My friend goes on to say ‘If I dare to allow myself to be led by that gaze, my life will become, in all likelihood, quite different, truer and braver.’ If I dare, that is, not to refuse but to meet the perhaps dangerous-feeling challenge of the God who looks at us out of the eyes of child, eyes full of innocence and trust and love, looks at us with a gaze that constitutes a piercing demand that we should repay the trust and protect the innocence and honour the love through an integrity and courage that should guide all our living. My friend remarks, interestingly, that we talk a lot about walking in Christ’s footsteps, but not so much

about meeting his gaze. Indeed, it is good to think of ourselves as under the loving yet demanding gaze of the forty day old Jesus, by which we shall, if we dare, be purified. Where that gaze leads us, what it challenges us to, is to a following of Jesus, a walking in his footsteps on the way of the Cross, the cross which is surely adumbrated in the sword that is to pierce Mary's soul. And so we return to the multi-facetedness and complexity of feeling in this Feast day. The Candlemas story is the last of the narratives of Christ's infancy – the close of Christmas. (I'm not sure in these unusual times that we in the Benefice have been absolutely punctilious in respect of the custom of keeping up the Crib until Candlemas but certainly cribs have been maintained well beyond the secular end of the Christmas season somewhere around January 3rd and Christmas joy has been visually asserted by them, as is right and proper.) Anyway, Candlemas is part of Christmas – but it has very strong tones of suffering in Simeon's prophesying which for us who know the whole story of Jesus' life points us towards Passiontide and the Cross. Our liturgy will mark the turn. Christmas joy today, yes, and of course, but today liturgically is the end of Christmas joy.

Nevertheless, fortified by our joy that our eyes have seen the salvation embodied in the Godchild who sees and loves us, let us dare to walk with Christ the way of the cross through shaping our lives courageously into lives of self-giving love out of which the light of Christ shines. Let us carry the Christmas Christchild in our hearts for the sake of a Good Friday project - so that we can, as our Swedish hymn puts it, be healing for the world's pain, remembering that God is with us, light in the night, to help us to dare. 'Children and stars are born in the dark / In the midst of the dark life bids us grow like a flame (that *kyndel*-element). God is near, in a little child who sees us'. And the apparently fearful and dangerous demand laid upon us to be fire and flame for Christ as we walk with him the way of the cross is laid upon us out of nothing other than the love that brings Christ to us as the Light at Christmas time. And that Light will carry *us*, as the hymn has it, as *we* seek to carry it to the world. The cross is where Christ's love in fact shines brightest and our walking the way of the cross is for the healing and sanctification of the world and of ourselves and for the final dispelling of darkness by the light of God's love. The Candlemas truth is that Christmas and Good Friday are inextricably linked. At both moments the light shines in the dark and the joy and promise of Christmas are finally validated through the painful glory of the cross, the supreme expression God's love.

Children and stars are born in the dark without protection of force and weapon. In the midst of the dark, life bids us to grow like a flame. The light carries us, God is near in a little child who sees us.

If we bear the child in our hearts we will be healing for the world's pain. God is with us, light in the night, to help us to dare. The light carries us, God is near in a little child who sees us.

We listen to *Barn och stjärnor*