

the great procession

a sermon preached on the feast of

Candlemas: Presentation of Christ in the Temple

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Malachi 3:1-4, Psalm 24, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

How can we reconcile the manifest contradiction at the heart of the Christian proclamation, illustrated so starkly in today's story of 'the presentation' of the forty day old infant Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple by his faithful parents?

"For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of *all peoples*, a light for revelation to the *Gentiles*..."¹ All peoples – even the outsiders!

And yet, "This child is destined for the *falling and rising* of many in Israel, and to be a sign that *will be opposed*..."²

Salvation for *all* – including all those reckoned by religious club members to be outside the reaches of 'salvation'. And yet, *discrimination*, falling and rising, a reality that will be met with opposition.

This season's ritual ending embodies, and invites us to enter into, the apparent contradiction at the heart of the Christian proclamation: we are invited to quite literally make the pilgrimage from Crib to Font, from the place of birth to the place of death. The whole Christian community is invited to undergo this pilgrimage, together, assisting and accompanying each other as companions on the way.

So the liturgical celebration of Candlemas quite literally embodies this tension: we will process from the place of birth, to the place of death, the place of drowning with Christ. These are *not* alternatives: they are two aspects of the one reality. The bearing of candles symbolising enlightenment according to this Christian paradox. The reconciling of this contradiction is accomplished primarily by undergoing it.

All persons are invited into this great procession. *And* it's a procession that will be resisted, opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. Notice that it's the 'inner thoughts' that will be revealed – exposed, brought to light – for illumination, consciousness, enlightenment are inextricable from 'salvation'. And we know, from the full length and breadth of the gospel story, from so many encounters between Jesus and the people, that those who are apparently with Christ may not be, while those who apparently are not with Christ may be.

But of course, those familiar with the Eucharist will hardly be surprised by this great contradiction: eating of the bread of *life*, drinking from the cup of *suffering*. All are drawn into this great 'wedding feast': yet Eucharist is a sign that reveals the inner thoughts of many, the rising and falling of many.

Forty days after our gathering in here at midnight – reversing the steps we took in that darkness, lighting candles at the Crib – Candlemas refuses our relentless attempts to domesticate and sentimentalise the birth of 'baby Jesus'.

Comprehending the contradictory nature of salvation requires a capacity to suffer the tension of the opposites. The refusal to suffer the opposites – and the premature resolution of them - is an attempt to reduce the pain of our own inner tension. When Christians talk 'salvation' in ways that prematurely and concretely separate and categorise people, this is almost certainly a sign of the incapacity – or unwillingness – to suffer the opposites, to face up to our own inner tension.

On this feast day we may well ask: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"³

¹ Luke 2:30-32

² Luke 2:34

³ Malachi 3:2

Only the person who has themselves been purified by the necessary time of waiting and suffering, and who themselves is ready to relinquish everything, including, with Simeon, their own life,⁴ can see and articulate and withstand the depths of the Divine mystery.

Only those who stand faithfully in their own religious tradition – Mary and Joseph, doing what “is stated in the law of the Lord”⁵ – are spiritually prepared to hear and withstand Simeon’s stark message. These attitudes – as embodied by Jesus’ parents, on the one hand, and old Simeon, on the other – are the key to understanding the nature of ‘salvation’, which otherwise is bound to suffer from premature resolution of the opposites, from facile and dangerous one-sidedness.

The rigour of Candlemas may well leave us wondering whether we are able to go this way. “Because [Christ] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested”.⁶ We have a companion and guide in this great undertaking, who invites us, in this sacred meal, in this great procession from womb to tomb, to participate in his very life. Thanks be to God!

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⁴ Luke 2:29

⁵ Luke 2:24

⁶ Hebrews 2:18