

Candlemas: Luke 2.22-40

Many thanks to Elizabeth Stokes for today's reflection on Candlemas.

'For there is always light.

If only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be

it'

Amanda Gorman

This was the final sentence recited by the young poet at President Biden's inauguration, and challenged me to think about our roles as lights to the world.



Today is Candlemas. It is a festival of light, but has many other names and connotations with both religious and pagan roots. It acts as a pivot point.

In the annual calendar this ancient festival (now called Groundhog Day in the United States) marked the midpoint of winter, halfway between the winter solstice (shortest day) and the spring equinox. It was the day to start preparing the winter earth for new spring planting (the 'awakening' of the ground – a new beginning). It has also been used as a predictor of the weather for the rest of winter!

In the church calendar it marks the end of the season of Christmas/Epiphany (yes, your decorations really must come down now...). We take one last look back at Christmas and Christ's coming, then turn to look ahead to Christ as saviour - Lent and the cross.

The events described by Luke are known by several names: 'The presentation of Christ in the temple'/'Presentation of the Lord'; 'The purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary'; or 'Hypapante' (Meeting), in the Greek Church.

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to fulfil the requirements of Jewish law. Jesus had been named and circumcised on the eighth day; now after 40 days, his parents came to the temple for the rite of purification after childbirth, which included the offering of a sacrifice. In their case, as a poor couple, two pigeons or two doves (Leviticus 12). The parents were also obliged to "redeem" their first-born son: a payment for the Passover sacrifice, when the Jews had been freed from slavery (Exodus 13). The price was five shekels, paid to the priest.

Luke however focuses on the presentation or consecration of the child to God. Mary and Joseph are offering Jesus to God, his father, little knowing the role he would play in the future. He in turn would offer his life to free us to be in relationship with God.

These traditional rites then took a very untraditional turn.

Amid the hubbub and ritual of the temple, two elderly people met the baby Jesus and recognised God. They were patiently waiting, living in expectation. Their revelation is even more remarkable if we remember how few people recognised Jesus for who he was - throughout his adult life.

Simeon is described as righteous and devout, with the Holy Spirit resting on him. He takes the child into his arms and boldly proclaims Jesus to be the light of the whole world, as well as the glory of his own people of faith. He bursts into song with the canticle that we know as the Nunc dimittis. Now Lord, let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled.

**My own eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared in the sight of every people;
A light to reveal you to the nations
and the glory of your people Israel.**

Simeon's life is fulfilled – he can now bow out. But he continues, bravely, to warn Mary and Joseph of the future: Jesus will cause division, revealing people's secret thoughts, suffer opposition and ultimately cause untold pain for his mother.

Enter Anna, prophetess and daughter of Phanuel (face of God). She was from the tribe of Asher, a northern tribe which was scattered, and was widowed at a young age. Potentially rootless and isolated, she chose to devote herself to God: in the temple; in prayer and fasting; in worship and listening.

She recognised the face of God, but that for her was not enough: she had to get the news out to everyone around her - shining the light out into the world.

At this feast of Candlemas, some churches stage a Candlemas procession, carrying lighted candles, to the font or the front door of the church. As we respond, "Let us shine with the light of your love", we are reminded to go out into the world displaying the light of Christ.

Coming full circle to Amanda Gorman's poem, I ask myself:

- Are we brave enough **to see the light**? To take our focus off ourselves and our current situation, and to open ourselves to God, so we can recognise him in the people and the world around us?
- Are we brave enough **to be that light**? To live as Christ did – to serve, to love without reservation, to be misunderstood, maybe to cause division?

Not on our own, but we have a faithful God who has promised he is always with us.

*Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple,
in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts,*

*by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is live and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever,
Amen.*