

Candlemas

by Rev Jane Kraft

A sermon given on 3rd February 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Epiphany is about recognition, it is about seeing something which has been hidden, and recognising it for what it is.

It's the time when our thoughts and worship are directed towards the revelation of Christ's true nature; that the human Jesus is also divine. He is The Word made flesh. At a specific moment in time the eternal creator of all things became one with his creation.

The last few weeks we have thought together about the great Epiphany themes:

- The story of the wise men which tells of the first Gentiles to believe in Christ.
- The account of Christ's Baptism with the extraordinary and unworldly occurrence of a voice from heaven which was an unmistakable indication of Christ's divinity. At this event the river the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land in fulfilment of the Old covenant became the place of recognition of the creator of the new covenant.
- The third great Epiphany story the wedding at Cana is more complicated. It is not so easily recognised or understood. At Cana Christ works the first sign of heaven and reveals his glory when ordinary things are put to extraordinary use.

Today that theme is continued as we reflect on the account of Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to the Temple in obedience to the Jewish law.

To fully understand the significance of this we need to do a bit of Jewish history.

The tradition of presenting the first-born male to the Lord stems from the great event when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh refused to let them go despite Moses's pleading. Repeated plagues were sent and each time Pharaoh agreed to their leaving but as soon as the plague departed he recanted. The final plague was different to the others. God told Moses that the first-born males in all the land of Egypt both animals and people would die in one night. The Hebrew people could be saved by putting the blood of a lamb on the doorpost of their dwellings using a bunch of hyssop (remember this when in a couple of months' time to we get to Good Friday where a branch of hyssop is again used), if the Hebrews sprinkled the blood of the lamb, the angel of death would pass over them and the first born males would not die.

The sacrificed lamb from which the blood had come was to be eaten and if one lamb was too much for one family then neighbours should share it together. Here is enshrined the origins of the Jewish Passover feast. It is the event which is an annual reminder of the liberation from slavery in Egypt. Even today the Jewish family gathers round the table on the eve of the Passover Sabbath and recalls the story and in a paradox of time make it their own in a very special way.

The significance of Sacrificial blood of a lamb and the importance of the firstborn male became a very special part of Jewish culture and worship. We see this acted out in the story of Samuel brought to the Temple by Hannah.

(Remember barren Hannah who pleaded with God for a child and whose words of thanks giving to God for this son so markedly resemble Mary's words of the Magnificat.)

The astute of you will by now be picking up all sorts of Old Testament connections which Luke is paralleling in his account of Jesus' young life.

Next time we hear of Jesus it is again in the Temple listening to the rabbis but today his parents meet with two ordinary elderly faithful Jews, interestingly a man and a woman. Remember women were marginalised in the society of the day and not only was this woman female she was a widow of advanced years so with no husband and beyond child bearing age, her usefulness in society was, in the eyes of the people of the day, negligible.

Yet here she is with Simeon, representatives of the faithful Jewish community, watching and waiting.

Waiting can be hard. I arrived and knocked on the door of my son's house slightly earlier than expected last Sunday afternoon. My 6 year old granddaughter rushed to the door shouting *she's here!* I'm afraid on opening the door she had a huge disappointment for she found me on the step instead of her best friend whose parents had promised to bring her round for tea on their way home from lunch with other friends'. My granddaughter had been waiting since lunch time in eager anticipation of her friend's arrival and all she found when she opened the door was Grandmum! She was very good and greeted me with a hug and kiss but her disappointment was clear. When the friend did arrive an hour later there was great rejoicing and excitement: her parents had indeed kept their promise; the wait had been longer than expected but they came.

Israel had been watching and waiting a long time for the promised Messiah.

400 years before, the prophet Malachi had foretold the coming of this Messiah. His prophecy has an expectancy about it and "is noted for its vivid portrayal of the love of God as well as his mighty power.... He leaves us with the feeling that the story is not yet finished that God still has promises to fulfil"¹

This theme is picked up in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, another representative of the Old Israel when he says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life" (John 3 v 16).

In the encounter with Anna and Simeon Israel's past is recalled but in Simeon's words we are bidden to move forward.

Candlemas which we celebrate today, is a pivotal moment in the Church's calendar for like the words of Simeon it turns our direction of thought from the crib to the cross.

On 6th March we will begin the forty days of Lent and journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and again to the Temple, and so on to the cross, where "the first born of many brethren" Romans 8 v29 "the first born from the dead" Colossians 1 v18 as Paul refers to Him in his letters, the Lamb of God who shed His blood for the redemption of all human kind.

¹ Illustrated Bible Dictionary Hodder and Stoughton 1987 ©Thomas Nelson Publishers