

Theme: - The light of the world.

Today we celebrate Candlemas, also known in the Roman Catholic church as the feast of light and hope; the feast of Candlemas commemorates ritual activities that took place in the temple in Jerusalem; in this case the presentation of Jesus into God's service, and the purification of Mary his mother. These ceremonies were not unique to Jesus, or to Mary, all devout Jewish families undertook these ceremonies. The presentation of Jesus in the temple was a ritual of thanksgiving signifying Jesus' redemption as the firstborn child, this took place as soon as Mary was allowed into the temple, which was why both were usually done at the same time.

We're told that his presentation was, "As it is written in the Law of the Lord", which can be found in Exodus 13 verse 1 and 2 where we read. "The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine". The ceremony of redemption or thanksgiving was in recognition that children were now known to be a precious gift from God, which was not always the case; indeed, many people today do not thank God for the birth of a child, the most precious gift you could be given.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day observed a multitude of ritual observances to mark significant passages of ordinary life. These observances served as a constant reminder of their relationship with God and encouraged them to regard all of life as sacred. As the church, we also need to help people to observe the passages of life; birth, coming of age at 18, getting married, death, in ways that acknowledge the Lord as the creator of all things. As individuals, we need to make space in our lives to express thanksgiving for the blessings we have received, especially for the blessing of children, and to praise God for his guidance and forgiveness.

Where possible, we need to eat together as a family, as indeed we will in a moment at the Lord's table. We need to take the opportunity to express thanks for the food we have, especially knowing that there are hundreds of people around the world who have very little food, and some who have none at all. We need to pray with our children, and teach them to pray. We need to make God a part of our daily lives. As the Jews did all those years ago in their ceremonies and rituals.

Now Jewish law required that a woman who had just given birth to a male child should be kept at home for 7 days, this was because they were regarded as unclean during that 7 day period. Throughout the Bible reference is made to a system of ritual purity that had both social and theological significance for the Israelites. After the 7 days she could take up her life again with the exception that she could not go to the temple for a further 33 days making a total of 40 days.

To signify the end of her 40 day confinement, she's to take, if she's poor, two pigeons or doves, one as a sin offering the other as a burnt offering, to the temple in Jerusalem. This requirement is laid down in the book of Leviticus in the 8 verses of chapter 12 where she's to take the birds to the tent of meeting, which in Mary's day was the temple in Jerusalem.

This of course was in acknowledgement of the graciousness of God for the gift of a new baby in their family. So, these were the two reasons for Jesus' family going to the temple in Jerusalem, it was for the presentation of Jesus for the ceremony of the redemption of the firstborn child, and for the purification of Mary.

Now in Jesus' time the Jews were expecting a Messiah, the Old Testament is full of prophesy about him, but what would he be like? Would the Messiah be like king David, but much stronger to conquer the entire world? Or would he be a great champion who would restore Israel and Judah to one great nation again; no one knew. But in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah many people in Israel prepared themselves for war. People, who today, we would call rebels or terrorists, were arming themselves and training for the day that this Messiah, this giant of a man would appear, and liberate them with their help.

But in contrast to all that we have Simeon a righteous, devout, quiet, and prayerful man. He didn't dream of violence, or of armies, he just kept quiet, prayerful watch for the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed one. Simeon may well have been an Old Testament scholar, he would have been aware of Malachi's prophesy, "The Lord whom you will seek will suddenly come to his temple," which was probably why he was always there.

We are also told by St Luke that through the power of the Holy Spirit Simeon had been told that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah, verse 26. In verse 27 we are told that guided by the Holy Spirit Simeon came into the temple, and when he saw the baby Jesus, he recognized him for who he was, the Lord's Messiah, such was his close relationship with God. And although he recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he referred to him as God's salvation, and he said those now famous words that have been written down for us to sing, which we call the Nunc Dimittis.

Now among the words of the Nunc Dimittis are words which tell us that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles. Simeon was a prophet, and he prophesied that we Gentiles would also worship God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and we sit here today as proof of his prophetic insight. Then Simeon blessed the Holy family and added. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed". He will be the cause whereby many will fall. Simeon said that not everyone would believe Jesus when he tells us about the kingdom of heaven or about his father.

People will make up their own minds; they will make their own judgments. It is not so much that God will judge us, it is more that we will judge ourselves; and our judgment is our reaction to Jesus Christ. If, when we are confronted with his love, we remain coldly aloof, untouched, or actively hostile towards him, then we are lost, because we are running away from God. If we seek the help of drugs, drink, or other consolations to get us through the day then we are running into the darkness and abyss of Satan's territory.

But Simeon went on to say that Jesus would also be the cause of many to rise. He said that if, when we are confronted with the goodness and the loveliness which is Christ, and our hearts run out to him in answer to his goodness and love, then we are running to the light of the kingdom of God. That paragraph is a hint as to why the Roman Catholics also refer to Candlemas as the feast of light and hope because Jesus is the light of the world. For those

who have faith in Christ, Christ will raise up to heaven; he will lift us up out of the old life of sin and death into a new life of joy, happiness, and security. Simeon then adds that Christ will meet with opposition, and that's true because there will always be those who want to follow their own way, indeed the opposite way. There is a great refusal to have Christ in their lives, just as there is a great acceptance of Christ in our lives.

There was also Anna the prophet whose history Luke gives us in our reading. She was only the fourth such person in the whole Bible, so women prophets were rare, and Anna was 84. Now the name Anna has the same meaning as the Old Testament name Hannah, which means 'gracious', and it was Hannah who gave birth to Samuel, and it was she who praised God for her son and who in her joy dedicated her son to God. In the same way it was now Anna who publicly joined in the ceremony of the dedication of Jesus into God's service by praising and thanking God for the child, and by speaking of him in relation to the redemption of Jerusalem.

St Luke then wrote, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God was upon him." Christ not only grew in physical strength but also in Spiritual strength, with God as his guide, and it is coming to church regularly, taking time for private prayer at home, reading the Bible at home, and reading the sermons which are put on our web site every week, and studying in house groups, if you are able too, that we grow in spiritual strength. And this is true for all of us, from God's point of view we are work in progress right up to the end of our lives, and for that process to work we need to keep in touch with God and God's people.

St Paul wrote in his 2nd letter to Timothy chapter 4, these words, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness." In finishing the race St. Paul was eluding to the fact that he stayed faithful to Christ right up to the end of his life, and we are to do the same, we are to stay faithful to Christ right to the end of our lives, so that when we see Jesus we will have the joy of recognising him, as did Simeon.

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