

Candlemas 2008

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Happy Candlemas, or should I say Happy Groundhog Day, well its a lot easier than saying Happy Presentation of Christ in the Temple Day. Unfortunately it's a lot less informative. I thought I would "Google" Candlemas as a warm-up before writing the sermon. The BBC religious page devotes one paragraph to the religious significance of the day and three pages to the superstitions surrounding it. Did Jesus come to earth so that we could draw conclusions about snowdrops or the movement of wax down a candle? But then that is what we do and countless generations of humans have done before us when we wish to hide an event that challenges us. We swaddle it in twaddle. We bury it so deep in layer upon layer of meaningless irrelevant pap that it ceases to goad us into action let alone provoke thought. And each succeeding generation adds its own defence shield around the event so that now 2000 plus years on it takes dedication to strip away the layers.

I want to touch on three themes tonight, revelation, presentation and light.

Candlemas represents the end of the Christmastide celebrations. It is the end of a season of revelations. Revelations to Mary, to Joseph, to Elizabeth and Zechariah; to shepherds and Kings, to baptismal candidates on the banks of the Jordan, to wedding guests and now to two elderly people in the Temple.

God wasn't revealed to great numbers of people in a stadium, but to small numbers of people and most intimately to individuals. It wasn't following a much heralded build-up; there wasn't time to change into one's best but without prior notice and in the middle of everyday life.

That is how God comes to us. He reveals himself to us on a personal, intimate level in the course of our everyday lives. Sometimes it is not until we look back that, like the wedding guests at Cana, we realise that He was present. He is not interested in receiving worship born of fright but in freely given love no matter how much the candle flame of that love might flicker or how dimly the wick might burn. When we come together in worship we have an opportunity to grow and support others to grow in the love of Christ but even when we are together that love touches us and reveals itself to us individually.

There was a period when I felt somehow inadequate because I had not had a Damascus moment like a number of people I knew. There was no moment of blinding revelation when I could say I became a Christian. Revelation does not have to be instantaneous. It can and frequently does take a lifetime. Given my propensity to cynicism, I now realise that had I have experienced such an event, I would like Scrooge seeing the ghost of Marley, probably have put it down to a badly digested piece of beef and dismissed it. The revelation of faith is life long and moments of enlightenment are not at the time of our choosing. Anna and Simeon did not know when they walked in the precincts of the temple on that day that they would encounter God, least of all God in the form of a baby.

Presentation has been topical theme in our family. About 10 days ago my elder son Joshua was confirmed. At the service two adults from Wirksworth were baptised before they were confirmed. I thought back to Joshua's baptism as a baby. Infant baptism is a bit of a minefield for me, or perhaps in current company I should say a curate's egg. However, just as for Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the Temple, it provides an early and valuable lesson to any parent. In bringing children to baptism we are reminded through the act of presentation that they are in a very real sense not our creation but God's, they are not ours to possess and to mould into our likeness. They are given to us by God, a gift certainly, but to treasure not to own. At baptism the child and the parents both stand before their shared Father. Whenever I am frustrated by the actions of my children, I try to think, usually too late, of how frustrating I am to my Heavenly Father. Whatever age we are we remain children of God.

I watched my son kneel before the Bishop to be confirmed. I thought of the time that I had presented myself for confirmation and wished, in part, to return to the level of uncomplicated faith that I had at the time and which I see in my son today. In this service Stanley will chant the line "The Old man carries the child but the child governs the old man". As we grow older it becomes more and more necessary for us to seek the child within us. Not for any narcissistic reasons but in order to fight off the layers, the hard accretions of cynicism, world weariness and care, that over time build around our soul. For just as superstitions mask the meaning and challenge of Christian festivals so we like Marley forge with the passage of time invisible chains that bind us. In Mark Chpt 10 verse 15 Jesus tells us that "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it". We need to present ourselves before our heavenly Father as a little child full of wonderment, with purity of love and yes with lots of questions. As we get older we seem to ask fewer not more questions. Why is that? Does our joy in the world around us fade, or do we just slowly accept the relentless pressure of society to conform. We are not called upon to be childish but child like. If you have not read it then I urge you to read "Mister God this is Anna" by Fynn. It tells the story of a remarkable and inspirational little girl called

Anna and her relationship with "Mister God". It gives a template for all grown-ups seeking the child within and seeking God.

Lastly, the theme of light. In the 7th century the Festival of Candlemas began before the dawn with a penitential procession carrying candles. Why is it that somehow we have lost a ceremony with meaning and replaced it with superstitions about snowdrops? Candlemas reminds us that we are called upon to carry the light of Christ into the dark places of the world.

It was not until I was preparing for the discussion session on Jesus and ambition that a verse from St Matthew's gospel which I had heard since childhood suddenly struck me. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven". I had always interpreted it to read let the light of God so shine before men. It is not. Christianity is about the abolition of selfishness not of self. We are the creation of God, created out of love, unique and loved by God our Father for the individuals we are. God wants us to shine with all the potential that he invested in us; not for our selfish benefit but that through the expression of that potential we might cause the light in others to ignite or burn more brightly. And for that light to burn with the radiance we see so often on the face of a child and so rarely on that of an adult. A child's smile is infectious. It lights the faces of those around us. I hope that the child within will come to govern all of our lives; that freed from superstition and the cares of the world we may fulfil our God given potential and light up the lives of those we meet.