

Sermon: Candlemas 2011...

This week has seen another Christian Festival come and go, rather neglected because it was midweek. It's my occasional practice to transfer these weekday Festivals to Sunday, otherwise we should not have the opportunity to keep them, and our celebration of the Christian Year would be less than it should be. This week's Festival was Candlemas or The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or, as *The Prayer Book* also says, The Purification of St Mary the Virgin. I believe the Americans celebrate something called Groundhog Day on 2nd February in respect of their belief that if the groundhog casts a shadow on that day, the winter will be prolonged. All of which just goes to demonstrate the truth of Chesterton's saying, *When men cease to believe in the Christian religion they don't believe in nothing: they believe in anything.*

John Donne tells us in a sermon about the origin of Candlemas:

It was the pagan Dies Illuminarium, the day of lights. The church took the occasion of doing so from the gentiles. At the beginning of February, the pagans celebrated the feast of Februus which was their Pluto. And because that was the god of darkness, the church solemnised it with a multiplicity of lights. And Christ, who is the Light of the World was this day presented in the Temple

So what is this ceremony with the baby Jesus and Mary his Mother about? They were of course a Jewish family. And, according to the Law of Moses, women who had given birth were obliged to be ritually purified. This is ironic because Mary was the only one who needed no purification, ritually or otherwise, as *that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Ghost*. Families presenting their offspring made a sacrifice of a lamb, if they were well off, or if they were poor of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

When Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus entered the Temple, there took place this dramatic scene. Simeon, an old man, had been given the gift of prophecy from God. He was devout. The gospel tells us he was *waiting for the consolation of Israel*. That means the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. God had promised him that he would not see death before the Christ came. As soon as the prophet Simeon recognised Jesus as the Christ, he took him up in his arms. There must have been something strikingly holy about Simeon for Mary to let him hold the child. With infant Jesus in his arms, Simeon utters those words which we repeat at Evensong as *Nunc Dimittis*:

Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Notice how radical Simeon's prophecy is. Here they are in the most Holy place in all Israel, the temple in Jerusalem, devout Jews strictly performing a Jewish rite of passage. And yet Simeon prophesies that the Jewish Messiah, the Christ whom he has just recognised is to be the Light of the Gentiles. This is revolutionary. Thirty-five years before St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. And Simeon makes this prediction while Jesus was only a few days old.

What did Mary and Joseph make of it all? St Luke's gospel in the Prayer Book version says, *And Joseph and his mother marvelled at these things which were spoken of him*. That's putting it mildly. The original Greek word for *marvelled* is *thaumazontes* – shocked to the core, overwhelmed by the wonder of it. A thaumaturge was a wonder-worker, someone who worked by spells and enchantment. So when the gospel says they *thaumazontes* it was as if they were enchanted.

As if this were not wonder enough, Simeon goes on to predict something of what Christ's messianic career would involve. He says to Mary:

Yea a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.

Here we are, Jesus but an infant, and the prophet Simeon points towards the distant prospect of Good Friday. Candlemas is halfway between Christmas and Ash Wednesday and to mark this vividly, the church developed the practice of changing the colour of the altar and the priest's vestments from white to purple sometimes in the middle of the Candlemas service: from the colour of his Incarnation to that of the beginnings of his sufferings

And the wonders are not finished yet. Next to appear is the prophetess Anna, an eighty-four year old widow. For all those years, since the early death of her husband, Anna had remained in the Temple praying and fasting. God had rewarded her with prophetic vision, just as he had Simeon. She recognised Jesus for who he was and what he would be. And she *spoke of him to all that looked for redemption in Jerusalem*.

There are layers upon layers in this story. The Law of Moses prescribes that sacrifice, preferably of a lamb – though it is likely that Joseph and Mary would have been able to afford only the pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. But again the scene is full of poetic and prophetic irony. For it is Jesus who will become the sacrificial lamb. And there is more. All ritual sacrifices were made in the Temple in Jerusalem. Now do you remember how, just a few days before his Crucifixion, Jesus is challenged in the Temple by the Jews and he replies:

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this Temple in building and wilt thou rear it up in three days? St John's gospel makes his meaning clear: *he spake of the Temple of his body*.

So the Jesus who, as a baby, has sacrifice made on his behalf in the Temple, himself, his own body, becomes both the place in which the sacrifice for us takes place and the sacrifice itself. For in that terrible day just before his death, immediately before the Passover, the very day of sacrifice:

He found in the Temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves and the changers of money sitting. And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the Temple, and the sheep and the oxen; and poured out the changers of money and overthrew the tables and said, It is written, My House shall be the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves.

The sacrificial animals were the Passover, the sacrifice for sin. By his death on the Cross, Christ becomes the Passover, the sacrifice for sin. As St Paul says, and as we repeat every Easter morning,

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the peace.

Now here in the person of Jesus, in the little but astonishing story of his Presentation in the Temple while he was only an infant, there is something momentous. After it, the world will never be the same again. And yet the gospels barely comment on it. And this is the astonishing thing. For thousands of years before the coming of Christ, man made sacrifice to God. With the coming of Christ, it is God who sacrifices himself for mankind. Christians do not need sacrificial lambs, for Christ is the Lamb of God. The sacrifice of animals ceases. So there is no longer any need for the Temple. Jesus in his body becomes both the temple and the sacrifice. The Jerusalem Temple is actually destroyed by the Roman army a few years later. The Law of Moses concerning ritual purity is done away with and instead it is the death of Christ which purifies us from our sins. As for the sacrificial doves, they are the emblem of the Holy Ghost.

And so the Christian Church replaced the old Jewish ritual of purification with the Prayer Book's beautiful service *The Churching of Women* which is nothing to do with impurity but is, as the Prayer book says: *The thanksgiving of women after childbirth.*

The faithful obedience of Mary, his mother – a girl of about fourteen - is profound and terrifying. Here in the Temple, while Jesus is only a baby, she gets news of his death. After her glorious Annunciation, how could she bare such heartache?

*To Simeon's open arms she gave the Child
Now at last he could depart in peace.
And Simeon's word of thanks to Christ's young mother
Was to tell her her heart would be broken*