

## Part 1

Candlemas. What's that all about then?

We are here today in this lovely church, and we have lit more candles than usual – and when I asked Karen to arrange this I had to sit myself down and ask, why are doing this? What is Candlemas all about? Is it simply a historic festival that parts of the church, mainly the catholic and orthodox churches, recognise and celebrate, or is it something that can help us in our worship of Jesus Christ, our Saviour?

So what's it all about then?

Well the first thing to say is that Candlemas isn't officially until next Friday, February 2nd, but we are celebrating it today, being the Sunday before Candlemas, because, well we can't really celebrate it after the event. There are two views on when you should take down Christmas decorations – either at the end of the 12 days of Christmas – being Epiphany, or the end of 40 days of Christmas being Candlemas. If we left the celebration of Candlemas until next Sunday, all the decorations would have been removed.

So why 40 days. Well, in Jewish times a woman was considered to be unclean for 40 days after the birth of a son (60 days, or in some interpretations 80 days, for the birth of a daughter for reasons which are hard to understand, but the best interpretation I have come across is it reflects the purity of the new woman who has been born as well as the mother). The idea then is the birth process of Jesus continued for 40 days until the child is presented at the temple on the 40th day. So Candlemas, which is also known as the festival of the Presentation of Christ in the temple, happens 40 days after Christmas – or February 2nd.

So what makes the presentation of Christ at the temple so special – two things – first it is showing that Jesus was brought up according to laws of the Jewish faith, but also, it introduces us to two characters, Simeon and Anna, who recognised Jesus as the Messiah – but more about them later.

Some other interesting things about Candlemas. It is possibly one of the oldest Christian Festivals – some say it was created by Jesus' original apostles. Whilst this is impossible to prove, what we do know is that in terms of writings about the church there was a gap between the book of the Acts of the Apostles and about the 4th Century. But in those earliest writings there was reference to Candlemas as if the festival already existed, rather than it being created then. We don't know when it was created, but it could be right at the beginning of Christianity.

Candles are really important in church life. In church we always light candles for our services, we give a candle to someone when they are baptised, and let's be honest, one of the simplest symbols we use in church to understand and remember is Jesus being the light of the world. Having said that, we, in our sort of church, use candles to create atmosphere – as we do for candle lit carol services, without each candle having a great symbolic meaning – but in other church traditions the candles have a bigger part to play.

The blessing of candles, which is part of a Catholic Candlemas service, is considered to be one of the three big blessings of symbols, in church life along with ashes and palms. People are encouraged to take a blessed candle home to use there in times of tribulation – and indeed it is deemed appropriate to greet a priest who brings communion to your home with a lit, blessed candle. Perhaps these acts are not relevant to many of us, but to some people these acts of blessing candles help them with their faith.

And finally, there are the cultural traditions associated with Candlemas, which are interesting but perhaps have less Christian significance. In France Candlemas is celebrated by the eating of crepes – indeed it is known as the day of the crepes, and there are two, at least, derivations of this – one is that

crepes were used to feed the pilgrims from Rome, and the other being, the more practical, way of using up last year's flour, which sounds more like our Shrove Tuesday. And in Luxembourg celebrations centre around children singing carols at people's doors and receiving treats (no tricks on this occasion).

So whilst we are celebrating Candlemas today, and I hope these candles are providing a wonderful atmosphere of worship for you, helping you to worship Jesus the light of the world, I would encourage you to focus more on what we are going to learn from those two characters in the story, Simeon and Anna, which are will speaking about later.

## Part 2

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

There is a story of a small boy who was wandering around a churchyard and he spotted something in the grass. He knelt down and picked up a small frog. The frog looked up at the boy and said, "If you kiss me then I will turn into a beautiful princess." The boy looked at the frog, and simply put the frog in his pocket. After a few minutes of wandering around to see what else he could find the frog stuck her head out of the boy's pocket and said to the boy, "If you kiss me then I will turn into a beautiful princess and you can marry me and we will be prince and princess." Again the boy looked at the frog, pondered for a moment, and then slipped the frog back in his pocket. Ten minutes later and the boy was still wandering around looking for treasures, and the frog, slightly impatiently, again stuck her head out of the boy's pocket. "If you kiss me then I will turn into a beautiful princess and you can marry me and we will be prince and princess, and I will look after you for the rest of our lives." For a third time the boy looked at the frog and was about to put him back in his pocket when the frog said, slightly sheepishly, "What do you think?" This time the boy spoke. "You see I am still a small boy. I'm really not interested in girls, and all that stuff, yet. But a talking frog – that's cool!"

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

Simeon is one of those characters in the bible who has something of a cameo role. He appears once, we are told a little about him – not much – and then he says something that, the more we think about, the more important it appears to be. This whole story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple is very much the end of the Christmas story – but poor old Simeon is never really considered to be part of the Christmas story. You don't get a Simeon character in your nativity set – but having said that what is so important about Simeon? We are told that he was righteous and devout, that he was looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested upon him. Clearly an amazing man, but the one thing that we generally remember Simeon for being – is old! We are not actually told that he is old, but he does appear to have been waiting to see the Messiah for a long time, and now he sees him, he can die peacefully – so we assume he is old.

Probably even so old that he remembers what Jerusalem was like before the Romans took over in 63BC. Before that the Jews had been able to run things themselves in their country but now they had to do what the Romans told them – and the Jews longed for a time when that would not be the case. But whereas most Jews were looking forward to a Messiah who would battle against the Romans and defeat them, that was not the Messiah that Simeon was expecting. Simeon was one of the few people who had no dreams of violence and of power and of armies with banners; those people believed in a life of watchfulness and prayer until God should come. All their lives they waited quietly and patiently upon God. Now he had seen this baby, held this baby, and he now felt this life of waiting and praying was complete, uttering these words, so familiar to us as the beginning of the Nunc Dimitis, so often used in funeral services as well as other times, "Now Lord, you 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."

But to those people watching what was going on, this must have all seemed most peculiar.

But then, "Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect."

And is that not the same story when it comes to our second character who makes her one and only appearance in the bible in this story. Anna has had what sounds like a very quiet life. She was married but her husband died after only 7 years of marriage and then she has lived as a widow since – and we know that she is now 84 years old – and she never left the temple, worshipping, fasting and praying, night and day. But then she saw the baby Jesus and told everyone who would listen who, and what, he was. Can you imagine all the people who passed through the temple and saw this peaceful, devout lady, day in day out, and now, all of a sudden, it is as if she has had a new energy, a new zeal for life, as she tells everyone what she has just seen.

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

So, at the end of the Christmas story – and this time in our journey through the life and ministry of Jesus, we have got to the end of the Christmas story, Luke, the writer of this gospel, has achieved the first aim of his book. This gospel, as indeed is his second book which is the Acts of the Apostles, was written to a man called Theophilus, and the first question which Luke wanted to answer for Theophilus is, "Who is the Messiah?" or indeed, "Is Jesus the Messiah?" In Jewish law if someone wanted a question answered it should be answered by two separate people, two witnesses if you like – and now, we have 4 witnesses. We have Jesus' parents Mary and Joseph who were both told by Angels who Jesus actually was, and now we have Simeon and Anna, who both knew what they were waiting for, and instantly knew that this baby was who they were waiting for. And I find that fascinating. No-one told Simeon and Anna anything about Jesus – but they instantly knew he was the Messiah. It reminds me of the other week when Andrew, Simon Peter's brother first met Jesus and said to his brother, "We have seen the Messiah" – we didn't know how he knew that Jesus was the Messiah. But 4 witnesses is enough to mean that Luke has given Theophilus his first answer.

But let me say that sentence once again.

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

Mary and Joseph had come to Jerusalem to complete the birth rites which any good Jewish parents would have done. This should have been straight forward; the end of the first stage of Jesus' life and their life with him. Mary was coming out of her period of uncleanness, Jesus had been circumcised and named, and, as the last but one verse of our reading told us, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth." They had done the legal bits, the boy would now grow up into, well, whatever the Angel had told them he would grow up into, the Messiah, whatever that meant. But Simeon had surprised them with what he said. Not only had he told them that their son was the one he was waiting for – and now he, Simeon, could die in peace, and that was surely shocking enough, but its what came next which would have totally thrown them. Using the translation from the Message,

Jesus' father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words. Simeon went on to bless them, and said to Mary his mother, "This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, a figure misunderstood and contradicted - the pain of a sword - thrust through you. But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are."

So to Mary's ears there is good news – her son will mark the recovery of many in Israel. That may be the end of the good news as she hears it. Because her son will mark the failure of many in Israel – well that is hardly going to make her Son, this tiny, gorgeous, 40 day old baby, popular is it? He is going to be a figure misunderstood and contradicted. That sounds worrying to our new mother surely. The pain of a sword thrust through you? You know, every Good Friday, or whenever I read the story of the lead up to, and the crucifixion itself, I find it so hard to listen to what happened to Jesus. But when I think of how Mary must have felt when it all went on it makes it doubly difficult to hear. And this is Simeon's message - that her Son, her Messiah, is going to have a violent death which will hurt her at the same time – which of course happened - we now know that she was there, at the foot of the cross, when he died.

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

Which all brings us to today. It brings us forward to us, sitting in this church in Foxton, remembering why Candlemas, or the feast of the presentation at the temple, is remembered. Because what Simeon said all came true. And it is as true today as it was then.

There were people then, and there are people now, who accept Jesus as who he is, and they follow him, and they live their lives according to how he wants them to live, and because of that they are promised a life with Jesus for ever. And there are people who don't accept him and run the risk of missing out on that life.

Jesus was a figure who was misunderstood and contradicted, and he still is. Some people talk about Jesus to try and gain a bit knowledge and understanding of Jesus, and some people talk about him to argue that he was just a man.

Some people then, and some people now, by standing up for Jesus risk their lives because of what they believe, and, let's be honest about this, some of us wonder, if faced by the challenges they face, "What would I do?" We know what happened to Peter – you will deny me three times. Not to be like Peter today is just as difficult.

But what we do here in church, and what we do in our lives outside of this place, is sometimes all we can do. As we see rejection of our Lord and Saviour, we can only be honest, and say that we are for Him, and we pray that God reveals himself to anyone who will listen so that they know who God really is.

Do you remember I talked about Simeon remembering what life was like before the Romans came in and took over their country, their city, even their temple. I was listening to someone talking the other day about what life was like in American churches before a certain date in 1963 – that was the date when America opened up Cinemas to be able to show films on Sundays, and all of a sudden American churches had competition as to what people did on Sundays. And from that date, at least partly because more and more alternatives to church on Sundays were opened up to the American people, church attendance gradually decreased from the 60% figure of the 1950s to the 20% or less figure of 5 or 10 years ago. But Simeon wasn't saying, "Let's hark back to the time before the Romans came". He was saying let's rejoice in what is happening today with the coming of the Messiah.

As we consider the way forward for our churches, let's not look backwards, but look at what is happening today in our country. How do we reach people who reject Jesus today. What should we be doing to encourage people to hear the wonderful message of Jesus? Living and building a church for today must be our priority.

And we will open our doors to welcome all people in whenever they are ready. And then, well . . .

Sometimes things don't turn out as you expect.

Readings: Luke 2: 22-40

What is Candlemas all about

St Laurence's Foxton

Amen