**Sermon The Presentation of Christ in the Temple or Candlemas**

**Malachi 3:1-4, Ps 24, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40**

Today, many people may not know that Candlemas is usually celebrated on the second day of February. It is an ancient feast, common to both the Church of the East and the West. Candlemas had a much greater significance to those who lived in rural communities. In the northern hemisphere it marks the transition in winter when the days become brighter. Hence, a moment of looking forward to brighter days.

Over the centuries, many traditions and legends have developed around Candlemas. One such legend involves animals. The belief that if the sun shone on the second day of February, and an animal were to see its shadow, there would be at least six more weeks of winter. Some of you may know the Candlemas rhyme:

If Candlemas day be fair and bright,

Winter will have another flight.

If Candlemas day be shower and rain,

Winter is gone and will not come again. (Traditional)

But this time of year ought not be celebrated as a pagan festival, it is a Christian feast which we celebrate and can be traces as far back to at least 543 CE. The Feast of Lighted Candles is mentioned by Bede and St Eligius, who was bishop of Noyon from 640-648. The feast quickly became popular. Candlemas is also known by other names as well – The Presentation of Christ in the Temple and also The Purification of Mary. Our gospel reading in Luke 2, verses 22 to 40 reveal both of these moments, Jesus as a babe being presented to the Temple and Mary coming for her purification under the Law.

The background to today’s reading comes from the book of Leviticus chapter 12 beginning at the first verse. The key points that we can draw from Leviticus is that under the Law a woman who gave birth to a son was to be considered ceremonially unclean for seven days. On the eighth day, the boy was to be circumcised. The woman was then required by the law to wait a full thirty-three days before going to the Temple for the purification ritual. This may help us understand why we celebrate the Feast of the naming of circumcision of Jesus on the first of January and that thirty-three days later the Feast of Presentation of Christ in the Temple falls on the 2nd of February. Notwhithstanding of course that there are some slight variations due to the day the feast falls as has occurred this week.

What then is the significance for us? Candles are symbols of hope. Candles were used to dispel the darkness. Electric lights are a very recent phenomenon. People for centuries have sat around the light of a fire, or once discovering candles could be made from beeswax or other types of wax. It is why we still have the tradition of lighting candles in the church. Once they were lit for the illumination of those presiding over the mass or reading the scriptures or for prayer. It is easy to imagine in a church made of stone with stained glass windows how dim the light would be or in fact, depending on the time of year, many services would have occurred in the dark days of winter. And so Candlemas, this service of light is significant to us because it speaks to us not only of the hope and light that candles offer but also of Christ himself, who came into the world to lighten our darkness.

Jesus described himself in John’s Gospel as the Light of the World and whoever follows Jesus will not walk in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12). At the moment of our baptisms and on the day of our confirmation, when we made that public profession of our faith, accepting to follow God for ourselves, in that moment when we made a private decision to follow God, Christ came into our hearts bringing us out of darkness, into his marvelous light. That darkness that speaks to us of our old natures. Christ calls us to live in the light. And light has the effect of not only dispelling darkness but also of revealing what is there hidden in the darkness.

Have you noticed how light is necessary for life itself? Plants naturally lean toward the light. In the same way, God calls us into fellowship by the light of Christ, inviting us lean into God in prayer, in fellowship, in reading the scriptures and caring for one another. Our lives are to reflect the light of Christ. Bringing light to others. Sharing with others the goodness of God that has been shown toward us may also become a reality for others. Christ came into the world, came to each one of us not so that we would hide that light and keep it for ourselves. No, but that our lives would show forth the glory, the grace, the love of the good news of the gospel, that Christ came for all, and all are welcome to receive the life giving light of the gospel.

What are candles good for if we do not light them, or if we cover them over? What are electric lights good for if we do not use them and instead sit in darkness. Our call toward transforming our lives and the world around us is to embrace all that God has for us in our lives. To embrace a loving relationship with God, not just in coming to church which is good and just and right, but in bringing our lives, our hearts to be exposed to the light of Christ. Bringing before God the things hidden in the darkness. Our attitudes, our discouragement, our half-heartedness, whatever it may be. It is why when we come to the time of confession during Epiphany we hear the words, ‘Let us bring our darkness to his light, confessing our sins in penitence and faith’. What is the darkness, the sin that so easily besets you or I that needs bringing to God? Bringing it to the light of Christ that we may be free to bring Christs light to others and thus enabling us to not only honouring God in our lives as faithful people but also to those around us who also need to know the message of the Light, the hope of Christ. What is it that we say in front of others that may not bring glory to God? Do we speak well of the people of God, of those who gather week by week? May we be a people who show the love, grace and mercy of God to those around us in all we say and do so that the light of Christ may shine brightly here and in our community.