



Introduction: Hello, I'm Clive Illman, a member at Holt United Reformed Church. Thank you for inviting me to offer some thoughts and reflections today. It goes without saying it would be so good if we could take our places in All Saints but that's not the sensible thing to be doing. However, regardless of where we are, we remain as one in our loving saviour Jesus Christ.

Today, the 2nd February is Candlemas and so if you feel comfortable, I invite you to light a candle in a safe place that we might focus on Jesus who is the light of the world.

Before beginning, let's take a moment in silence and breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit.

Opening Prayer

The Christmas story is behind us for another year,
the shepherds have gone back to the hillsides and their sheep.
The wise men have left Bethlehem and are well on their way home.
Herod has been left searching for the 'New Born King'.
Today we gather on Candlemas day in the Christ child's name and gaze in on events when Mary and Joseph entered the temple in Jerusalem.
Looking forward, moving forward as people who live in the light,
loving Lord, bless us as gather, apart, yet as one in Christ.
Amen.

On this day when the Church recalls the Presentation of Christ in the temple, let's read what Luke has to say to us.

Luke 2:22-40 (New Revised Standard Version)

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided

by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' ³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

A reflection on Simeon by Nick Fawcett. (*No Ordinary Man* book 2 (2000))

It was as though a wave of peace engulfed me,

A great surge of tranquillity flooding my soul

With a quietness beyond expression –

For I held him in my arms,

God's promised Messiah –

there, in that little wrinkled face,

that tiny, vulnerable child staring up at me,

the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

I just can't tell you what that meant to me,

not only the joy but the relief I felt,

for there had been many times when my faith had begun to waver.

No, I don't just mean my conviction

that I'd see the Messiah's coming,

though I did question that sometimes, it's true.

It went deeper than that,

to the very heart of my faith,

to those words of the prophet

about us being a light to the Gentiles,

bringing glory to God through our life and witness.

I'd always believed that implicitly,

the vision stirring my imagination and firing my faith,

but over the years my faith began to splutter,

doused by the harsh realities that surrounded me.

The fact we'd turned inwards rather than outwards,

our concerns more for ourselves than the world beyond,

and, if anything, our horizons were growing narrower by the day.

It was understandable, of course,

the opposition we'd suffered across the centuries

enough to dampen anyone's fervour,

but that didn't make it any easier to stomach,

still less offer any grounds for hope.

Could things change, I wondered?

Was there really any chance we might recapture that old spark,

that sense of sharing in the divine purpose,
testifying to his glory,
or was that dream destined to die forever?
It was impossible not to ask it.
But that day, there in the temple, suddenly it all changed –
faith vindicated,
hope realised –
for I knew then beyond all doubt
that God had been faithful to His purpose,
His chosen servant there in my arms,
the one who would bring light to the world,
salvation to all.
I saw Him with my own eyes,
touched Him with my own hands,
and after all that I could die happy,
my joy complete,
my faith rekindled,
my soul at peace.

Some thoughts.

Well this is different, so very different from what we might have hoped. So much is different now, so much has changed; as we take hold of the distractions this current disturbance to life as we know it continues to challenge our thinking, indeed our approach to everyday living.

You may or may not be aware that by way of the exercise we are encouraged to embrace; my wife and I continue to ride our tandem bicycle. It was something we actually took up long before covid when we retired in order to maintain some reasonable levels of fitness. It was a blessing then and it very much continues to be a blessing for us. Other road users might disagree. Cycling the lanes nearby has enabled us to get up close and personal with the changing seasons and the wonders nature has to reveal beyond our garden environment. In recent weeks we have noticed the growth progress of snowdrops in the hedgerows, a sign that spring beckons. We are fair weather cyclists. Only when it's not too wet, only when it's not too windy, only when it's not too cold, will we venture out. A few days ago the elements were favourable so off we set. Upon our return we took lunch and then sat to watch a program on our television which had actually been aired while we were cycling, but thanks to the magic of technology and a so called smart TV we were able view on 'Catch up'. When our chosen program had finished, I hadn't realised that another broadcast of a totally unrelated genre would follow automatically. I have to say that had the late afternoon gloom not begun to take hold we would probably have switched the television off and gone to do something perhaps a little more productive. Instead we prepared another cup of tea and left the television to its own smart devices. With warm tea in hand we discovered an episode from the 'Vicar of Dibley' series had started. It happened to be the first one of the series, the episode when the Revd Geraldine Granger, played by Dawn French, arrived to minister to the people of Dibley.

The story line goes that the previous incumbent had passed to a higher calling and a replacement was requested of the Bishop, another vicar that would continue ministering in the traditional way the village and its community had become accustomed. Extreme change was not something Dibley wanted or was prepared to consider. Change though, however it might be dressed up, was exactly what they got in the Revd Granger. She arrived in a storm, it was raining pouring, and the reception she received was pretty stormy too. The folk of Dibley were not ready for a female vicar. To set the context this was twenty seven years ago.

I appreciate then, that at the time the first episode was shown, this very situation was something many of our sisters and brothers in Christ debated passionately, and for many those passions remain. I pray, and we must all pray that whichever way our faith leans, whatever doctrine aids our Christ

centred journey we can be accepting, more understanding of one another's differences, and passionately embrace the diversity all ministry styles offer. I was fortunate enough to be at Salisbury Cathedral in 1994 when a family friend was among the first women to be ordained into the priesthood there. It was a truly joyous occasion for those who attended. Others would have wept.

As we celebrate Candlemas, we are reminded of the moment when Mary and Joseph went up to the temple with their son Jesus forty days from his birth. Mary to present herself for ritual purification as prescribed in the scripture they knew as Jews, and set out in the Book of the Law; (Leviticus 12, if you would like to look it up), and to present their first born for consecration to the Lord (Exodus 13, something else to check out later). We hear little else of Joseph thoughts, beyond his amazement; maybe he was completely consumed by the whole experience and unable to express his feelings adequately so simply kept his thoughts to himself. Mary though; I wonder if she had any inkling of the challenges and changes she might come to know as her son grew into adulthood.

What could she understand in that moment, as she pondered Simeon's words? '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—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' Parenthood brings many challenges; it has to deal with many changes. There are times of immense joy, there are times of weeping.

For Simeon and Anna this was clearly, as Celtic Spirituality would describe it; a thin place moment, a meeting of heaven and earth for them as they recognised their time had arrived; for Simeon, God's promise had been fulfilled, in Jesus he had seen the Lord's Messiah. For Anna, age could not constrain her praise and joy of seeing the Christ child. For them, everything they had hoped for, the changes they'd prayed for, lived for, came to pass that day when Jesus was presented at the temple.

Perhaps we have each known, indeed will meet some of the varied experiences, Mary and Joseph, and Simeon and Anna encountered in the temple that day. So I wonder then, on this Candlemas day, how we might embrace the challenges and changes we'll greet in the days and months ahead as we walk the way of Jesus. For there will be changes, unknowns, perhaps more than usual, I don't think we can rightly expect to return to the old normal, for things to be 'the same old same old'.

The world changed, tradition was challenged when Jesus was born, likewise the world has become a different place in just twelve months to the one with which we had become accustomed. I've heard it said the world has become a darkened place, but we know and love the one Light that no darkness can overcome. It surely has to be for us then, to embrace the changes and challenges of our time and do all we can through our Jesus centred ministry, that the light of Christ continues to shine as brightly as it ever has.

Tradition has it that on this day, candles for use in church during the coming year are brought and blessed as symbols of the 'Light of the World'. The very same light Simeon recognised in Jesus proclaiming 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'. We are light carriers now, there are curtains that hold back the light to be torn from top to bottom by our ministry routed in faith, love, hope and in unbridled passionate praise of the living Lord, for then, regardless of fair weather or foul our Joy must surely be complete, our faith surely rekindled, our souls surely at peace and all creation will cry "Amen, thanks be to God".

'A flame that cannot be put out' *(by Jan Sutch Pickard, taken from the Wild Goose publication 'Hay and Stardust', 2005)*

In the dark days:
under rain-heavy clouds,
among broken branches,
on sodden earth,
the snowdrops light their candles.

A flame that cannot be put out
by darkness or gales or doubt.

In the salt wind,
Rocks buckle like umbrellas;
As bare trees
Heave a great sigh,
The snowdrops tremble.

But their flame cannot be put out
by darkness or gales or doubt.

Perfect, as though carved
In green-veined marble,
life pulsing through tissue
delicate as the eyelids
of a sleeping child,
curved like small fingers holding on.

Their flame is steadfast:
It is full of hope and new beginnings.
Darkness or gales or doubt.
Cannot put it out.

Let's pray

Lord God,
in the birth of Jesus your Son
we see the fulfilment of your promises,
not just for all the world but in particular for us too.
We thank you for the reassurance this gives us of your love.
We look back on the past year and see your presence in our lives.
Help us to live securely in your love during all that the coming year brings and shine as lights in the world.
Amen.

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.

(United Reformed Church Service book version)

May the blessing of God be ours,
the blessing of the beloved Son be ours,
the blessing of the perfect Spirit be ours,
the blessing of the Three
be poured out upon us,
serenely and generously,
now and for ever.

His light shine upon us.

Let us go in peace, shining as lights in the world, to love and serve the Lord,
In the name of Christ

Amen



Snowdrops (once commonly known as Candlemas Bells) were gathered at Candlemas to decorate Churches in this country before the reformation. They were symbols of purity, which was connected to the rite of purification that Mary observed by going to the temple forty days after Christmas.
(Ruth Goudy – The Flower Writer. <https://ruthgoudy.com>)

**** Thank you for your time and please, if you lit a candle, don't forget to extinguish it safely.****