

## Homily for Candlemas

“My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a strange time in the life of our world, and we, in the developed nations of the West, are living in an age of protest when people in our societies seem to experience their political and social inheritance as an unwelcome burden. Generally speaking, they vote no in referendums, whatever the question is, they vote no in elections, if they can discern a question to be answered, and they vote no in their life choices, wherever they happen to find themselves - they also vote for absurd political candidates who promise nonsense, rather than heavyweights who tell the truth. Furthermore, they act with extraordinary selfishness as if life was all about them and as if the path to enlightenment consisted solely in thinking only about themselves and in gratifying every desire or impulse that might make its sorry way through their consciousness as they step over the dirty sleeping bags of the homeless victims. The race is to the swift and the strong, you need to do unto others before they do unto you and the devil take the hindmost. Yes, that is a negative wintry picture from someone who is getting older and feeling that his world and its values is disappearing from history, but it is not an inaccurate picture of some of what is going on in the world around us. The sad thing, of course, is that those who are embracing selfishness in order to survive and flourish will find that they are confronted only by the poverty of their own bleak resources and by their increasing isolation from others.

Yeats springs to mind, does he not... in his most pillaged poem, *The Second Coming*, written in 99 years ago, in 1919. 1919. 2018.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the  
world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of  
innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of  
passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand;*

What can we do? Well, I'll leave the political solutions to the politicians, but our solution is the light of Christ. What is important in life is what brings us together and not what drives us apart. Love of God gives access to that light and bears its fruit in love of neighbour and in a life renewed.

This holy feast of Candlemass shows us that light. It speaks to that vision. It is the contrast between celebration and hope on the one hand and puny acts of self-

assertion that are nothing less than a lurch into the darkness on the other. How fitting it is that we celebrate this of all feasts at this time and remember that the light shineth in the darkness and that the darkness comprehended it not.

Luke brings us a wonderful vision of the fulfilment of the promises of God in the person of Christ. He lovingly invokes one of his favourite themes, that of liberation as he tells the story of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and the reaction of Simeon in the words of what we now think of as the Nunc Dimittis, the passage spoken by Simeon which begins “Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace...” The Nunc is familiar to us, of course, from the office of Compline, the Night Office and, in our imaginations, it is associated with the gathering of darkness. Those who have stayed in a Benedictine monastery will have experienced this. At Buckfast Abbey, for example, Compline is sung in Latin, to the traditional chants, in darkness and from memory, lit only by the distant candles of the shrines and the altar. The darkness presses in and the Nunc Dimittis, the canticle at the heart of the Office, becomes part of the prayer of the whole office for safety through the night and salvation at the last. But this text, although it is justly used in its historic place in the Divine Office is a far brighter star than we sometimes give it credit for: it speaks of the light of Christ in the perspective of liberation.

Saint Paul, in the epistle to the Romans, speaks of the ‘groaning’ of all things from the beginning of time until the coming of Christ. He says:

*The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons.*

*8:20 It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope  
8:21 of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God.*

As he speaks the words of the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon celebrates being freed from his groaning. It is a wonderful hymn of liberation on behalf of himself and on behalf of all the nations as he greets “the light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.”

Freedom and glory. Luke is so eloquent at expressing for us the freedom and glory of the children of God, and in this feast, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the liturgy enables us to act out these wonderful liberating gifts.

In the Procession we entered into the mystery that we celebrate. We walked remembering the yearning of the people of God for the light of the Saviour. As we did so, we remembered, too, our recent celebration of Christmas and we treasured in our hearts the flame of hope lit there by there Holy Spirit. In that

procession we portrayed our common journey towards the heavenly kingdom and the fulfilment of all things in Christ. Our little flame is weak, but it is part of a great army of little flames. We are not alone, and we must not feel alone. The Lord we are seeking has entered his Temple and we have a High Priest who intercedes for us, one who knows our condition and who has stepped this way before us and who is with us both when we step forward proudly and when we stumble and fall. For one last time this liturgical year, we celebrate the mystery of Christmas, rejoicing that God was made man, has dwelt among us and that the people that dwelt in darkness now has seen a great light.

Our lives are not always simple, and our hearts and minds are not always equal to the challenges that we face as Christians, or equal to the life that we lead, caught between light and darkness. Happily, our salvation does not depend on our little competence, courage or confidence. Let me say it again; we are not alone, lost in a selfish little bubble, for light has entered the world, a light that is the certain promise of salvation. We can't always think our way out of trouble, or make our rebel hearts more apt to do our bidding, but we can look up at the light and keep walking forward, and we can do so with confidence, for, as the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us today, "Jesus, by his death, set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by fear of death." This is the final glory symbolized by our procession today. It reminds us that we go on, as the years pass by, we go not to darkness and death, but towards the everlasting light of life. Amen.