

Candlemas sermon by Andrew 2 Feb 2020 Jesus bids us shine

Malachi 3: 1-5; Hebrews 2: 14-end; Luke 2: 22-40

Candlemas is one of my favourite festivals. I love the hymns, the prayers and all the candles – and just the story is so wonderful. Two hopeful new parents bring their newborn to the Temple, just brimming over with joy and expectancy. It couldn't be better.

Only just like in Sleeping Beauty it's like the bad fairy, the uninvited guest, has burst in on this scene of joy with a prediction that feels more like a curse than a blessing. This time it isn't a spinning wheel with a sharp needle to draw blood, but a sword to pierce Mary's soul and the foreshadowing of the Cross – even here just when it all looked so good, so hopeful. The candles we light for the Light of the World coming among us – would we be just as well to blow them out or not light them at all if this is how the story's going to end? Not at all, no way. We light our candles almost as an act of defiance against this world's darkness.

This week on television every night there's been something about the Holocaust as we all remember seventy-five years since the liberation of Auschwitz. If ever there was ever a darkness to extinguish hope this was it. Could humanity sink any lower than to attempt the annihilation of an entire race, separating parents from children, making mothers choose to save one child and lose another – making people mortally afraid? This is a sword to pierce the soul of all humanity. We should all feel it.

If you go to the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem where world leaders and survivors gathered this week, not so far from the temple where Simeon and Anna met with Mary and Joseph, the whole story is recorded so that no-one can ever forget. But most moving of all is the Memorial to the Children. You go into darkness only to find yourself completely surrounded by thousands of candles, thousands of lights, reflected by mirrors and every one is a child – and their names and their ages are read out endlessly. It's a litany of innocent lives cut short by a wickedness, an evil, their young minds could never have taken in. But their lights shine.

The light shines in the darkness, says St John, and the darkness never puts it out – though it certainly tries.

And this story is all of a piece with what's already happened. A child born in poverty under Roman occupation, a family forced into exile when Herod attempts his own "final solution" on Bethlehem's baby boys, and now here they are making the offering of the poorest of the poor – the smallest offering acceptable under the Laws. One day this same baby will set about the stall-holders with a whip and overturn the tables of the sellers and the money-lenders and all those people who on this day probably treated his parents as the least of the least, the bottom of the social heap, not worth bothering about.

But as ever we could be any of the actors in this drama and in life we find ourselves playing all these parts. Whether we're parents or not, we all know what it's like to worry about people we love. Like Mary who one day will send a posse of relatives to try

and drag Jesus home because the family think he is, quote, “out of his mind”, we all know what it’s like to lose sleep over children, or husbands or wives, or friends – but we also know what it’s like to reach that point where we have to let go. Mary has to let Jesus go to be who he’s destined to be and we all have to do this for the people we love. ‘Though we love them they do not belong to us. But in the letting go we keep a candle lit, the candle of love and prayer, the candle of a tenacious love that won’t interfere, but won’t give up either – a bit like God’s love for us. We keep that candle lit.

Or we can be Simeon. Who doesn’t know what it’s like to wait for the fulfilment of something you hope for, but it never seems to arrive? But in faith, like Simeon, we keep showing up for God and showing up for other people, and we keep praying and we again keep our candle lit.

And the same goes for Anna who is such a powerhouse of prayer you could practically wire her to the national grid. The waiting doesn’t tire out this woman. She ain’t going nowhere. Like the woman with the issue of blood she’s got hold of the hem of God’s garment and she isn’t letting go for anything. She’s expectant, she’s ready so that when the Light of the World arrives before her very eyes she isn’t surprised – she’s just exultant. She knows she’s part of a story as ancient as time about God’s faithfulness to his people. So all her hopes are vindicated.

And of course there is Jesus, this little star fallen to earth. What will he do, what will he be? Let the storm clouds gather as they may as Simeon makes his prophecy, this child already opens his arms to the world and his gift is light. And in this world, just as it is, as bad as it can be, he asks us to be bearers of his light and never give up, never let our candles go out.

Just yesterday, we baptised a little Polish baby, Amelia, in St Salvador’s – or rather Mariusz did and I helped, me not understanding a word and yet knowing exactly what was going on and being said. I understood the meaning. I lit the baptismal candle from the Paschal Candle for Mariusz and he gave it to the young parents just beginning their new adventure with this gift of a child. “Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father.” It’s a tall order when you’re six months old, it’s a tall order when you’re in your sixties, but this is what the child in the Temple asks of all of us. Remember the words of the hymn:

Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around
 Many kinds of darkness in this world abound:
 Sin, and want, and sorrow— so we must shine,
 You in your small corner, and I in mine.

Or as another hymn puts it: This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. For the light shines in the darkness and the darkness never puts it out. Amen.