

**SERMON FOR BENEFICE HC, 29 JANUARY 2023 – PRESENTATION OF CHRIST
(CANDLEMAS) AT BSJ (based on Luke 2:22-40 & Malachi 3:1-5)
Light and love**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

The 2nd February is Candlemas, and Christmas will be officially over - a chance to remove any decorations that got left behind after 12th night and put away the cribs in our churches for another year. Today, we celebrate both Candlemas and the presentation of Christ in the Temple. Candlemas used to be when the church candles were blessed for use during the coming year. Presenting first born sons to God was a part of the Jewish Law that included requiring a mother, 33 days after giving birth, to offer a sacrifice as part of the purification ritual enabling her to return to the Temple. As we leave the past year well behind and look to the future with hope, the juxtaposition of Candlemas with the presentation of Christ reinforces the notion of Jesus coming as a light into the world. Candlemas is about midway between the winter solstice and spring equinox, a point at which we begin to turn from the cold and dark of winter towards the lighter, warmer days of spring. It is also a pivotal point in the church calendar, roughly half way between Christmas and Easter, half way between Christ's birth and his death. In the Church lectionary, it's a time of prophecies coming to fruition and of those yet to be fulfilled; a time when, even while still celebrating Jesus' arrival, we are also looking ahead to Lent, Good Friday and the cross.

Let's start by looking back to when the prophet Malachi, speaking on God's behalf, foresaw that "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple" - hard not to see this as predicting the account we've heard today in Luke about baby Jesus being brought to the Temple. His birth was to mark a time of change, a transformation which Malachi likens to the effects of a refiner's fire, ridding gold and silver of impurities. It's a process suggestive of a transition that will be neither comfortable nor easy. As is often the case, prophesy comes with both good and bad news, with hope and a dose of harsh realism.

We find a similar mix of good and less good news in the passage from Luke. Reading it feels a bit like being on a see-saw. We start walking along it from the end on the ground, all the while looking back as Luke quotes from the Old Testament to explain the purification and presentation rituals. At the see-saw's pivotal point, we are told it was the Old Testament prophecies of people like Malachi to which Simeon had held fast for his entire life. The hope engendered by those prophecies was reinforced by the Holy Spirit's assurance that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. I doubt that Simeon was expressly looking for the promised one in a baby, yet on the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, he had no hesitation whatsoever in declaring that tiny child to be the salvation of all people. Sometimes, our preconceptions can make us blind to God's presence in unexpected places. Not so with Simeon, who, even amid the hustle and bustle of the Temple, sees and understands that the ancient prophecies have come true.

Then suddenly, as we continue along the see-saw, Simeon starts to prophesy and we are pitched forward, forced to confront the future and the idea of radical change. Firstly, he states that no longer will Israel alone count as God's people, but through this child, the whole world will be given the light of understanding. The Son of God will be inclusive, inviting all into his embrace. Then he turns to Mary and foresees, somewhat less positively, that the child will be "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed". The hope brought by the birth of our Saviour will be tempered by the harsh reality of a King and redeemer who does not quite meet expectations - a promise fulfilled in Jesus, who will reign, not by instilling fear, but through love. Many won't understand and the process will be painful - a further reminder of Malachi's refining fire analogy.

There are more hints of future suffering in Simeon's second prophecy, made to Mary, who is told that a sword will pierce her soul. From our vantage point, 2000 years on, we understand exactly what that means. We carry a picture in our minds of Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross, watching her son die a slow death. She may well have recalled Simeon's words at that point and possibly felt that all hope was lost. But from what we know of Mary, she may well have remembered what the angel had said to her 33 years before: "of his kingdom there will be no end". This would be the flame of hope, remaining

strong in the darkness of despair, a darkness that would never overcome Christ's light.

Anna, too, recognises in the baby a promise fulfilled. Both she and Simeon have spent their lives carrying their hope like a light before them - now they can pass the baton on. John the Baptist will take it up in due course, preparing the way for Jesus, who will in turn pass it on to his disciples to spread the light to the whole world. The passage from Luke paints a picture with both light and shade, hope and anxiety. It looks back to the dim, expectant past and forward to the dark unknown in which the promised light will flicker, but not be extinguished. The overall picture is one of hope, with Jesus at the centre.

We carry that hope with us today, ignited at baptism when a candle is lit for the newly baptised, who, as the liturgy suggests, are to "shine as a light in the world to the glory of God". Here at Candlemas, we are replicating that by the candles we have lit today. Sometimes it feels like we are holding a tiny tea light to illuminate a huge arena, and that must have been how Jesus' friends felt after his death. But in the end, the light of the resurrection dawned, and they could see that the light had never really been put out. In a short while, we shall proclaim the great mystery of faith: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again". These are words to ponder as we treasure the mystery of what God has done through Christ, and take up the baton ourselves to bring the light and love of Christ to others.

In the name of Christ, who is the light of the world, amen.