

The Presentation of Christ. February 1st.

Malachi 3: 1-5, Hebrews 2: 14-18, Luke 2: 22-40

Candlemas is one of the 12 great feasts of Christendom.

Guess how many days it is after Christmas? 40 is like a linking number, for soon we have 40 days of Lent.

Candlemas is the last feast day related to Christmas in the church yearly cycle. Some people leave their Christmas decorations up until February 2nd. We now farewell Christmas and look forward to Easter. At Candlemas candles were blessed in many countries for people to light during a major storm. It served as a Christ-light; helping to calm people's fears.

Other countries have an evening candlelight procession from the churches to the streets.

In 541 A.D. there was a terrible plague. As was the custom of the times plagues were considered to be God's judgement rather than appalling hygiene and millions of vermin, so the Emperor called for fasting and prayer and on the 2nd of February the plague stopped. This event added to the importance of the feast. In Scotland quarterly rents were due on Candlemas.

The feast includes Mary, the mother of Christ and some religious art showed Mary holding the baby Jesus. Our picture shows Simeon holding the baby to bless him.

Simeon described Jesus as a light of revelation to the Gentiles. He was a prophet and understood that the Saviour of the world was for all people of all nations and ethnicities - much wider than only for the Jewish nation.

Candlemas also falls halfway between winter and spring.

There are traditions in the Northern Hemisphere that some animals wake up from hibernation at Candlemas, check on the weather and make a choice about going back for a longer nap – around another 6 weeks. In the United States the day is called 'Groundhog Day'. The squirrel or groundhog eats green plants, dandelions and grasses, so does not want to be outside in the snow.

There is a saying:

If Candlemas be fair and bright

Winter has another flight.

If Candlemas bring clouds and rain

Winter will not come again.

The weather is likely to be moderate.

We know Simeon's song as the Nunc Dimittis. My current translation is, 'Now you are letting your servant depart in peace'. We can sing the song or listen to it.

Letting go can be a problem. It can also be a problem to take on something new, especially a new understanding that deepens the quality and fulfilment of our lives. We value what we work for and for Simeon it was time to take on something new. He had invested years in the ritual of the temple and yet now he welcomed its passing. He welcomed the youngest of faces, the baby Jesus. The early

church recognised, like Simeon, that the good news of God's love was for everyone, both Jews and Gentiles.

T.S. Eliot wrote a poem, A Song of Simeon. I will read it to you.

Thomas Stearns Eliot - A Song for Simeon

Lord, the Roman hyacinths are blooming in bowls and
The winter sun creeps by the snow hills;
The stubborn season has made stand.
My life is light, waiting for the death wind,
Like a feather on the back of my hand.
Dust in sunlight and memory in corners
Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land.

Grant us thy peace.

I have walked many years in this city,
Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,
Have taken and given honour and ease.
There went never any rejected from my door.

Who shall remember my house,
where shall live my children's children

When the time of sorrow is come?
They will take to the goat's path and the fox's home,
Fleeing from the foreign faces and the foreign swords.

Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation
Grant us thy peace.

Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
Now at this birth season of decease,
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

According to thy word,
They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation
With glory and derision,
Light upon light, mounting the saints' stair.
Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision.
Grant me thy peace.

(And a sword shall pierce thy heart,
Thine also.)

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
Let thy servant depart,
Having seen thy salvation.