

In the lectionary readings today we celebrate Candlemas – the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. When Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph took him to the temple to present him to the Lord as a rite of purification.

There watching and waiting and guided by the Holy Spirit were two Prophets Anna and Simeon. When they saw the baby Jesus they praised God. Simeon said, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.” And Anna told everyone who was looking for God’s redemption that it was here and now.

At Candlemas we see in the imagery of the candles, the light of Christ, which we are all called to carry, and bring throughout the world, to scatter the darkness, and become a warming light to all humanity.

In our first reading today the prophet Malachi tells us that if we are to become a light to the nations, we must begin by purifying ourselves so that Christ’s light burns brightly within us, and can radiate through us to all whom we meet.

Through Epiphany we’ve rediscovered the revelations brought to us in scripture; we’ve wondered anew at God’s love for us that he sent his only Son into the world as a vulnerable baby and to die on the cross. It is this reality, the gift of the presence of Christ in the world, that we have been celebrating since Christmas and we conclude that celebration today by receiving the light and hope of Christ.

I wonder, have you ever waited so long and so hard for something that you almost missed it when it finally arrived? Perhaps the anticipation had led to impossible daydreams so that the real thing almost slipped under your radar. Or perhaps you waited for so long that your attention drifted just at the moment you needed to be alert.

Simeon was waiting to see the Messiah. We don’t know how long he had been waiting. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit promised it would happen before he died and we know he was an old man. His song sounds like the song of someone who had been waiting a long time – someone who had been filled with anticipation and is now filled with long-awaited joy as he takes the baby Jesus into his arms and knows him to be the one he has been waiting for.

I wonder how many of God's promises we don't see fulfilled simply because we aren't paying attention or because we don't have eyes and hearts, like Simeon's, prepared to see God at work in unexpected places. Or maybe we don't see it because we are more comfortable in the waiting than in the uncertainty of what comes after.

Traditionally Candlemas is the day that ends the Christmas season, because today is about half-way between Christmas and Good Friday – half-way between Jesus' birth and Jesus' death. So today is a pivot point in the Christian year – the day when we turn from cradle to cross; birth to death.

Simeon's story contains that pivot.

Holding the infant Messiah, Simeon knows his wait is over, God's promise to him has been fulfilled. He praises God and sings of light and glory. And then Simeon turns to Mary and the tone changes: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also)."

I wonder if there wasn't a part of Simeon that would have preferred to just keep waiting – to hold on to the sense of hopeful anticipation rather than the more complicated emotions after the arrival of the Messiah.

But following Jesus is not just about Christmas – not just light and joy and celebration. Today, we allow Simeon to turn us in the direction of the cross, as we remember that following Jesus is also about sacrifice and faithfulness in the face of suffering.

And so, perhaps, in these different watchings and waitings we might find help for our own spiritual lives. Anna clearly felt called and fulfilled in her years in the Temple. But many of us may feel we have become stuck. We have been doing the same sorts of things in our spiritual lives for a long time. And perhaps this same model is totally satisfying and leads us deeper into our relationship with God and with each other; or perhaps it isn't and hasn't for a while. However, we may not want to move very far from where we are now. We may feel now is not a good time to start thinking and praying outside our normal routine; that we have neither the time nor energy nor inclination to see what God might have for us round the next corner in our journey with him. That we might even find ourselves standing in the wrong place.

But in the Gospel today one other person is waiting. Jesus, long foretold by prophets, the one who in the words of our reading in Malachi. "shall suddenly come to his temple." The one who in the beginning was with God and was God. The one who left with us his Holy Spirit to hold us close and direct us in the ways of his love. The same Holy spirit who led Simeon to the Temple and gave Anna her voice. Both Simeon and Anna waited in different ways, but for both of them the quality of their waiting, was active. Being open, ready and alert to the new things God was doing and showing them. And just as much as they were waiting for him, he was waiting for them. And he is waiting for us.

Lots of things in life can stop us looking forward like Simeon or looking properly at where we are like Anna. Current worries and concerns can certainly hamper our inner vision. Grudges, unspoken resentments, regrets and fears can all also tie us to where we have been for too long, and inhibit us as we try to move on. But the promise and fulfilment of Candlemas is Light. The Light of Christ shining in our darkness.

So, on this seasonal pivot day, we turn not simply from cradle to cross but from cradle through cross to the empty tomb, already visible, albeit dimly through the darkness still to come. Following Jesus is not just about Christmas; not just about Good Friday. Following Jesus is also about the hope and freedom of Easter. In Jesus' name. Amen.