

Sermon preached by the Priest Pastor
St Marylebone Parish Church
Candlemas 2020

Walking down Marylebone High Street can lead one into all sorts of temptation. So much gorgeous stuff on offer in the shops. One of my weaknesses is candles, I adore them, and there are so many shops that sell them, even ones that ONLY sell them. I nearly fell over when I went to enquire the prices in Diptyque. Well I didn't fall over but smiled politely and reversed slowly out of the door. Candles have become a lifestyle accessory that scent our lives and create a mood. Of course, for our ancestors they were a necessity rather than a luxury. Maybe that is why they would bring the candles for the year into church at this time of year to be blessed on the feast of the Presentation of Christ also called Candlemas. Without the electricity we simply assume will be there at the flick of a switch, candles were essential to life. Especially in a dark and cold winter.

When you are a vicar, you spend an awful amount of time on candles. Ordering votives, baptism candles, oil to fill up the altar candles, choosing a design for the paschal candle, pushing through candles into cardboard holders for Christmas and Easter, fiddling about with advent candles and hoping they don't set fire to the Christmas decorations or children's hair. Of course, if you are Rector of Marylebone, you have an army of people to do all of this for you.

So why bother with candles in church? In our brave new risk averse digital age, it would make much more sense to have candles powered by electricity. Indeed, the great big Torchiere candles either side of the sanctuary used to be powered by gas apparently before they reverted back.

I guess we do bother, because a candle flame is symbolic of so many things. In church, we are surrounded by symbols. The definition of a symbol is that it is a material object representing something abstract. What we are doing in church is experiencing material things that speak to us about things that are beyond time, beyond simple explanation or definition, the here and now, that speaks and ministers the eternal.

Candles are impermanent. They have a short life span and their flame is fragile. They remind us that our life is limited – it is given to us to value and to discern what is genuinely of value before it is too late. Just as Simeon and Anna were able, at the end of their lives, to recognise an ordinary couple with a baby coming into the temple as a little family that held within it the salvation of the world.

Candles give light. 'I am the light of the world' said Jesus in John 9:5. Without the light of Christ, our lives revert to darkness. Without him, we are lost.

Candles accompany the reading of the gospel in church, and as Simeon and Anna proclaimed the gospel, so the light of the gospel must be proclaimed afresh in our day.

Bishop Sarah announced this week the new Diocesan vision for 2030. In summary it is this: 'For every Londoner to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ'.

Whether we are resident or honorary Londoners, St Marylebone has a huge role to play in sharing the light of the gospel to the people of London, and each of us, as members of this community of faith, has a part to play in that. We are not merely observers or consumers; we are contributors and participants in that mission.

Candles are dangerous. One little flame could cause a massive fire.

When buying a candle you often see the warning 'do not leave unattended'.

Our spiritual lives and our church life should not languish unattended.

When religion goes wrong and becomes something people pervert for their own power it is indeed dangerous. Abuse, violence, misogyny, war, oppression and corruption, all have occurred in the name of religion, and blaspheme the almighty.

Simeon warned Mary that she and her son would be victim to this.

'A sword shall pierce your own soul too'. We need to attend to this fire we hold.

Candles need a spark. They are useless without a spark to light them.

We too are useless and dead without the spark of the Holy Spirit which ignites the flame of our lives.

The Holy Spirit appeared at Pentecost as tongues of flame. Again and again, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to come and abide with us, renew us and ignite the embers of our faith. Without the spirit, we are lifeless lumps of wax.

Finally, Candles are great in numbers. A single candle is very effective but a large group of candles all burning together is particularly beautiful and powerful.

At the end of this service we will each be given a candle, to show that each one of us has the privilege and responsibility to bear the light of Christ.

Jesus didn't just say 'I am the light of the world', he also said

'YOU are the light of the world' in Matthew 5;14. And he went on to say

'Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glory your Father, which is in heaven'.

So when you go home, if you light a candle, enjoy the fragrance and the ambience it creates but remember: impermanence, the light of Christ, danger, the spark of the Holy Spirit, and the call to be an inclusive and outward looking witnessing community.

As the gospel song puts it 'let your little light shine'.

Go out of here and shine as a light in the world to the glory of God.