

The Feast of the Presentation or Candlemas marks the end of the Christmas and Epiphany season.

The moment when Simeon and Anna meet the Holy Family in the temple, is for us as it was for them, the moment when finally, after the watching and waiting, the build up, the expectation, the full reality of who God is becomes clearer to us. The meaning of the journey, the sign of grace to make manifest all grace, the end toward which all things are oriented, finally comes into view and we behold His glory.

Of course, we have beheld His glory already, in this season and in our lives, but as for Simeon and Anna, now is the time where we stop and take the child in our arms, in our hearts, and say, now I can depart in peace, I have received this revelation, I know and trust that this is the one who I believe in, and I can go out into the world, into the rest of the year, the rest of my life, and live as though this really has been the transformational moment to make eternal sense of my life.

For each one of us, that beginning to make sense of things may take a different shape and form. It may also happen at various points in our lifetime, and may come in many ways. It may come suddenly, unexpectedly. It could be a person, a place, or a situation. It could be someone or somewhere you are already familiar with but where a new thing comes to pass; or it could be a new place, a stranger, out of nowhere, who teaches you something new.

It may come gently, a quiet moment of understanding and realisation, or it may be a jarring experience, when something difficult happens, which may be uncomfortable at first, but

will eventually indicate to us what we need to do. It might be in prayer and worship, or it could be walking down the street. But however it comes, it will come to you.

For me, something of this revelation and figuring out, manifested itself in an interesting way this past week. As many of you know, last Monday we celebrated in this church, the St Marylebone School Eucharist where seven students were baptised and confirmed into the life of Christ's Church. It was a glorious occasion, on the Feast of St Paul's Conversion no less, and it was a wonderful moment witnessing and praying with the students and our School Provost, our own Bishop (how many schools get their own Bishop?), as the children began this incredible new chapter.

I have had the privilege, over the past four months, to teach this confirmation class, many of them new to the school and to this church. And having got to know them well, and see already their growth in faith and understanding, it brought a tear to my eye as I watched the Bishop confirm them, and seeing the genuine look of happiness and excitement on their faces as they stood up, turning back toward their families and school as a new disciple. It really was a moment of revelation, hope and light. And as one parent told me at a gathering after the service, that he could witness his daughter growing.

Quite often I find myself in conversations with people about Church Schools; what they're actually like, how they really work, and what exactly is the role of a Chaplain in such an institution. And one question which is often asked, is how kids really feel about coming to church on Monday morning. Some who I speak with take a more cynical view; 'of course

the kids have to go church on Mondays, it's compulsory and so they have to take part whether they like it or not.' And those people are often surprised when I grin and adopt a sort of old fashioned vicar's voice and say, "Yes! And so they should!" But they are also surprised when I say how, in a Church School, like any school, where there is diversity of belief, and again so there should be; as much as fervent Christian faith, again so there should be; we can hold a service like our confirmation the other day, which is a big liturgy, a longer service than usual, lots going on, rich in symbols and signs, movements, prayers and acts of explicit faith commitment; and the atmosphere in the room, the amount of support and participation from everybody, was powerful, potent. You could hear, see and feel how everyone was into it, even among those for whom this was an alien experience. It's alien for most of us Christians quite frankly. I was stunned as everyone leaned in from the galleries and watched as those seven girls, in a busy life and a dangerous and confusing age, promised God to love Him forever. And everybody was thankful for it, even those who didn't share that exact same path.

Like all festivals in the Church's year, Candlemas grows out of the desire of the people of God to weave God's word into their own lives. Historically, it is said to be one of the oldest festivals in the Church, dating back to the fourth century, identified in sermons by Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and other early Fathers of the Church. The fourth century nun and pilgrim, Egeria, writes about a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 384, witnessing a sermon on Luke chapter two, a procession and Divine Liturgy, marking the feast. The first travel writer in the Church, how about that?

But it wasn't until 541, when a plague struck Constantinople, that the Emperor Justinian I and the Patriarch of Constantinople, formalised a more solemn liturgy for the feast, also as a way of encouraging people to pray and fast throughout that time when the plague was happening. A way of solidifying a community, praying for healing in a time when things could go either way. A busy, chaotic, uncertain age. Where life hangs in the balance. Where anything goes, where lack of direction, mistrust, or even trusting the wrong people abounds. It is a hard and difficult world, yet here, in a faith community, even in an extended, wider culture, there is a glimmer of hope, a sign of grace and an invitation to something more than we could ever ask for.

One commentary on The Bible I once read online (I'm still getting used to books), stated how the temple in Jerusalem was a busy place, chaotic in fact. People dashing around, praying, trading sometimes, meeting and greeting, it was a loud hub of activity, hard to pick anyone out of the crowd. And yet, an elderly man and woman, after waiting for years, earnestly praying, see a young family, a young child, and there, they know, without a moment's hesitation, that this is God. This is the sign of grace they have been looking for all along. How did they know? How could they tell?

That is the question we face as Christians. How do we look and know and tell? How do we look for God, know God, speak of God? How do we experience and share who God is, especially in a world where faith often seems pretty slim?

This past week, I really believe I saw a sign. And I know that we all can. Throughout our lifetime, whoever or wherever we are, we too can find ourselves in those same moments of revelation, light and hope, where, in a troubled, confused, even hostile and uncertain time, God works signs and miracles and invites us to come home as one. If we look, God's grace will appear. It was always going to be there. And that is the gift of Candlemas, and the gift of faith; we don't work the miracle, God does. And whatever we do, if our intention is toward Him, if we look, and, like Simeon and Anna, keep looking, we will see Him. Even if we are merely watching from the wings, we are still witnessing a miracle. So let us encourage one another to live faithfully, depart in peace and fulfil God's word as God gives us the ability.