

## Homily for Candlemas 2019

“My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I was preparing this homily I was, not for the first time in my life, allowing my mind to wander: I was studying an analysis of the main themes of Luke’s Gospel as they appear in today’s reading – fulfilment of promise, temple, universalism, rejection, witness, women – and I wondered what newspaper Luke would read. I decided that he would be a Guardian reader and would probably also subscribe to the Tablet and the TLS. Matthew would have the Daily Telegraph and the Jewish Chronicle. Mark is briefer and might read the Times, probably in a compact format, or, perhaps, because of his love of brevity and pithy summation, a tabloid. John, the great universalist, would probably be reading the Independent, The New York Times and, maybe, Le Monde or Die Welt just to see if the world still did not know the Word of God.

Luke brings us a wonderful vision of the fulfilment of the promises of God in the person of Christ. To the themes I have already listed I would add the theme of liberation, so prominently evident in the Nunc Dimittis, the passage spoken by Simeon which begins “Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace...” The Nunc is familiar to us, of course, from the office of Compline, the Night Office and, in our imaginations, it is associated with the gathering of darkness. Those who have stayed in a Benedictine monastery will have experienced this. At Buckfast Abbey, for example, Compline is sung in Latin, in darkness and from memory, lit only by the candles of the shrines and the altar. The darkness presses in and the Nunc Dimittis, the canticle at the heart of the Office, becomes part of the prayer of the office for safety through the night and salvation at the last. But this text, although it is justly used in its historic place in the Divine Office is a far brighter star than we sometimes give it credit for: it speaks of the light of Christ in the perspective of liberation.

Saint Paul, in the epistle to the Romans, speaks of the ‘groaning’ of all things from the beginning of time until the coming of Christ. He says:

*The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God.*

As he speaks the words of the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon celebrates being freed from his groaning. It is a wonderful hymn of liberation on behalf of himself and on behalf of all the nations as he greets “the light to enlighten the pagans and glory of your people Israel.”

Freedom and glory. Luke is so eloquent at expressing for us the freedom and glory of the children of God, and in this feast, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the liturgy enables us to act out these wonderful liberating gifts.

In the Procession – we entered into the mystery that we celebrate. We walked remembering the yearning of the people of God for the light of the Saviour. As we did so, we remembered, too, our celebration of Christmas and we treasured in our hearts the flame of hope lit there by the Holy Spirit. In that procession we act out our common journey towards the heavenly kingdom and the fulfilment of all things in Christ. Our little flame is weak, but it is part of a great army of little flames. We are not alone, and we need to remember that. And so, as we walk in procession, we recall, in the words of Malachi, that the Lord we are seeking has entered his Temple and that we have a High Priest who intercedes for us, one who knows our condition and who has stepped this way before us and who is with us both when we step proud proudly forward and when we stumble and fall. For one last time this year, we celebrate the mystery of Christmas, rejoicing that God was made man, has dwelt among us and that the people that dwelt in darkness now has seen a great light.

Our lives are not always simple, and our hearts and minds are not always equal to the challenges that we face as Christians. Happily, our salvation does not depend on our little competence, courage or confidence. We are not alone, for light has entered the world, a light that is the certain promise of salvation. We can't always think our way out of trouble, or make our rebel hearts more apt to do our bidding, but we can look up at the light and keep walking forward, and we can do so with confidence, for, as the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us today, “Jesus, by his death, set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by fear of death.” This is the final glory symbolized by our procession today. It reminds us that we, and those who are dear to us go on, as the years pass by, not to death, but towards the everlasting light of life. Amen.