

Sermon for Candlemas 2023

29 January 2023

Malachi 3.1-4; Hebrews 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-32

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.”

Words from our gospel reading, Luke chapter 2, verse 29.

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I first saw the film “Waking Ned Devine”, an Irish tale of outrageous lottery fraud and chicken dinners, aged thirteen. I’d never seen anything so funny before, and it became an instant household classic that we watched again and again. The film teaches two questionable life lessons: first, that an whole village’s colluding to claim a dead man’s lottery winnings is morally excusable if they share the money; and second, that since people say nicer things about you at your own funeral than at any other point during your life, it’s best to fake your death so you can stand at the back and enjoy.

The words of the Nunc Dimittis, spoken by Simeon in the temple when he sees the infant Christ, may seem an odd gospel centrepiece on a feast day that is ostensibly about beginnings, not endings; about light, not darkness. Simeon is welcoming his own death, because he has been promised that he will not die until the coming of the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. So his song of gladness, the last of such songs in Luke’s infancy narratives, is backlit quite noticeably with sadness.

It is also, of course, a keystone of the Book of Common Prayer’s evening service, and has been set to music countless times. Since priests are supposed to have their funeral plans nailed down well in advance, I state, for the record, that I would like the Geoffrey Burgon setting of the Nunc Dimittis at my own.

Many years ago I sang that piece in this very church, and jumped in the rehearsal when I realised I'd heard it before without knowing what it was called. The Burgon Nunc Dimittis is the theme music of another Brazil household classic, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, the 1979 BBC TV adaptation of John le Carré's perfect novel. It is odd to think that long before I had ever encountered choral evensong, or been in Oxford, or seen Radcliffe Square, which forms the still backdrop for those closing credits, I had been listening to this Nunc, over and over. The text, and Burgon's melancholy setting of it, are a perfect match for the profound sadness of a novel in which all that is admired and established is exposed as corrupt and betrayed.

The presentation of Jesus in the temple is, in a way, the opposite: it is the coming of the light into the darkness, the arrival of the saviour to a fallen people, and not only with an announcement to shepherds on a solitary hilltop, but in a public and religiously significant place. It signals the acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah, and an account of his engagement, or, in this early part of his life, his *family's* engagement, with the Jewish rituals of presentation and purification. The phrase "*their* purification" in the text is misleading, as the only person being purified in this instance is Mary, making a sacrifice of two birds to mark her re-entry into the temple after childbirth has temporarily rendered her ritually unclean. And, much more importantly, she brings her firstborn, and dedicates him as holy to God.

Ritual purification can be an uncomfortable idea for us. The service for "the churching of women" in the BCP is rather out of vogue, although it does not actually contain prayers for cleansing; only thanksgiving for the woman's survival of childbirth. In a culture that focuses heavily on the newborn and often neglects the mother, we might do well to bring this back, not forgetting that our tradition also incorporates a cleansing element in holy water elsewhere, not least in the rite of sprinkling; in the case of today's feast, the sprinkling of candles.

Candlemas is a time when our readings weave for us a story of purification, and noticing this may help us to understand not only the

Christian life, but the nature of Christ himself, Christ who enters the waters of baptism himself not to be cleansed, but to make our own baptisms holy.

The theme of purification begins in today's readings with the prophet Malachi's promise of divine judgement on a temple cult with the coming of a messenger who is characterised, terrifyingly, as "like a refiner's fire". Handel's *Messiah* contains an alto aria whose B section, accompanied by frenzied strings, sets two phrases from this passage: "for he is like a refiner's fire; and who shall stand when he appeareth?" No matter how many times I sing it, I always feel the electric charge of those words. And, like Simeon's song, there are two colours to this passage. Alongside the joy of the coming saviour, there is judgement as well, an uncomfortable, demanding prospect.

And, perhaps written earlier than Luke, the letter to the Hebrews gives us a discourse on sin, redemption, and the strange necessity of God's taking on our human nature. To redeem a fallen people, to perform the act of atonement, God must offer himself, and not as an all-powerful being, but as a person like us.

Jesus is not just born to a woman: he is born into a time, and a society, and a religion, and he is brought into the life of this religion in a necessary public act which is the beginning of his public existence as a person within the community.

Presenting a small new person to one's community is a joyful moment. But like the *Nunc Dimittis*, that joyful, sorrowful song, Mary's own joy at the presentation of her firstborn is complex, tinged with sadness: Simeon promises moments later that the child "is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel... and a sword will pierce through your own soul also".

The birth of a new child comes with the knowledge that human life contains joy and pain. But Candlemas is the beginning of the story, the moment when we celebrate the light of the world, who came to us as one of us, a child within a community, reminding us that there is joy in being together, and strength in the rituals of our faith and our shared life.

The sorrow in *Tinker Tailor* is because of the betrayal of the community; and the strength and joy of *Ned Divine*, lottery fraud aside, is in the love and loyalty within the village. We light candles today to remind ourselves of the coming of the light into the world. Pray, brothers and sisters, that we may be strengthened by that light, to take it beyond these walls and into God's wider world. Amen.