

St. Mary Magdalen Oxford,

Candlemas 2021

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“For mine eyes have seen thy salvation ... To be a light to lighten the Gentiles; and to be the glory of thy people Israel.”

+In the name of the Father

The gospel writer who put these words into the mouth of old Simeon would have known a lot more about darkness than we do – and so also very much more about the potency of light. In his world, oil lamps would have been the major form of artificial light, like those we read about in the Lord’s parable of the wise and foolish virgins. I wonder how many of you have lived for any length of time in an environment like that. I did during my “gap” between school and university which I spent in India. Some of the time I lived in a small Christian ashram alongside a religious community, way out in the countryside where there was no electricity, and the only form of lighting was a hurricane lamp which each of us lit at dusk, carried round with us, and whose wick we turned right down at night so that it would be possible to have some light in emergency. The villages within walking distance also had no other form of light, either in homes or outside in the paths and alleys. The darkness was very dark indeed: no welcoming lights in windows, and no residual glow in the sky as we would have in most of western Europe from street lighting or lights left on for security in shops and offices. What was friendly and well known in daylight could seem frightening and strange once daylight had vanished. It was certainly not a warm and comforting darkness: any unexpected movement or noise conjured up anxiety and even fear. I remember on my first night hearing a chomping and heavy breathing sound just near my bedroom window, part of which was just netting. I feared that wild animals which still roamed freely might think I was a tasty snack. At daylight I discovered that there were two large oxen, quietly minding their own business in their stable. What was more they rejoiced in the names of

the Anglican Bishop of Lucknow and the Metropolitan of Calcutta. We perhaps forget that even in our own country artificial gas and then electric lighting only developed from the early 1800s. Our ancestors, too, were used to very deep darkness.

So it is perhaps no surprise that most civilizations and religious traditions venerated light and the sources of light such as the sun, and many developed traditions of celebrating festivals of light. Hindus and Sikhs have the Festival of Diwali, Jews have Hannukah. Almost always these celebrations have taken on a far deeper significance, as light is associated with goodness, divine protection and guidance, and human flourishing, while darkness is associated with fear and evil, and death itself. In our most secular society light in the form of tea lights has taken on a new role – as we see so often at sites set up as makeshift places of remembrance and mourning after a tragedy. They may be manifestations of a residual folk Christianity; but they are also a recognition that light still bears the weight of human hope and defiance in the face of evil and death.

And we of course as Christians have Candlemas. Candlemas takes its name from a very early tradition in Christian history of celebrating this day, when Christ was presented in the temple and was acclaimed by Simeon, by processions with candles. We have an account dating from the 4th century by an intrepid female pilgrim to Jerusalem, who said that the solemnity and joy of this celebration equalled that of Easter.

In our scriptures the symbolic significance of light is there from the very beginning. In just the third verse of Genesis we read that God created light and saw that it was good. From then onwards light shining in the darkness evokes God's on-going creative and redeeming work, and his providential care of his chosen people. There it is in Psalm 27 for example, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?" Or in Psalm 119 (v.105) we hear of God's word being "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Or in Proverbs (6:23) "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light." Perhaps the greatest Old Testament passage using the symbolism of light is the one we hear at Christmas from Isaiah (ch.60) "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and

the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.... Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (vv.1-2) Or slightly later, “The Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.” (vv.19-20). The writer of Revelation of course took up this prophesy in his account of his vision of the new Jerusalem: “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” (ch.21: 22-23).

So it is within this scriptural context that the gospel writers used the imagery of Christ as the light of the world, as the light of God shining out in the darkness of broken humanity. The author of John in particular makes great use of the contrast between light and dark in his portrayal of Christ. The life he manifests and brings “was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1: 4) He puts into Jesus’s own mouth the words, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) And in his account of the Last Supper when Judas leaves the gathering he writes, “And it was night.” (John 13: 30)

But we need to probe deeper still if we are to understand at least something of the meaning of Christ as the Light of the World. One entry point is to ask ourselves the question what does light actually do? Let me return to my teenage experience of the Indian dark. Light shows up what is real and what is not, what really exists and what is illusion. My feared prowling predators turned into substantial farm animals at daylight. Frightening shadows and shapes turn into ordinary objects in the light.

Christ as the Light shows us reality – about God and about ourselves. As the Christ who holds within himself the human and the divine he shows us the very nature of God. In Jewish tradition it was understood that no human could see God and live. The children of Israel were told not to approach the holy mountain where Moses encountered God. But in the person of Jesus ordinary men and women saw what God was like, encountered the divine in human form. As the letter to the Hebrews put it (ch.1:3), Jesus

“is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” In him we, too, see the very nature of God, the outpouring love and mercy which are the very heart of God. It is through Christ that we can dare to approach God, and in a new sense see Him. Through and in the light of Christ’s Cross and Resurrection we are also seen by God - and live.

But Christ also shows the reality of a broken and sinful humanity. In his light we see how much of what we think we value is illusory and shadow like. He shows up evil and sin for what it really is, Christ’s teaching about love of God and of our neighbour as the two greatest commandments, his care for the poor, the weak and marginal, his forgiveness of sinners when the religious hierarchy sniffed in disapproval, and his healing of the sick – all these were actions which showed the love of God at work, but also where people were failing to love God and their neighbours. Supremely on the Cross he showed up sin, human alienation from God and alienation between people - but also the redeeming mercy of God. He still does just that. He continues to dispel darkness by calling us to himself, to walk in his light, to become children of light and to be transformed into the image of God. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, they were “Beloved”, and “children of light.” (1 Thess 1: 5) Changing the metaphor, he told the Corinthian Christians, that in Christ we are remade, into a new creation. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation...” (2 Cor.5:17) Broken humanity is remade.

Christ as the Light shines in the dark places of human experience – of sin, yes, but also of suffering. Christians should be very wary of any religious attempt to glorify suffering, particularly in this pandemic when so many are deeply hurt in body and mind, many are bereaved and facing loss and hardship perhaps unimaginable to most of us. But the Light shines in this darkness, too – through countless acts of kindness, through the compassion and care of strangers, through faithful prayer often for those we do not know. Christ still walks as light even in the dark shadow of death. We are called in some small way to bear that light as well.

So our celebration of Candlemas and our lighted candles bring us close to Mary and Joseph and Simeon. We share their joy and can proclaim that our eyes, too, “have seen thy salvation ... To be a light to lighten the Gentiles; and to be the glory of thy people Israel.”