

**Sermon, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple,  
Quairading and York, 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2024**

I trust you have your Christmas decorations taken down, and any Christmas cards received put away. Custom has it that while decorations and cards ought to be removed on the Feast of The Epiphany (6<sup>th</sup> January) you can wait to do so on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February which is the date of the variously known Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The Feast of the Meeting of the Lord, and Candlemas.

Our celebration today which is transferred from Friday is called the Presentation of Christ because it commemorates the Presentation of Christ by His Mother in the Temple at Jerusalem exactly forty days (forty being a significant number in Jewish thinking) after His Birth. Christ was brought to the Temple by His mother, accompanied by Joseph, and with them they bring the customary sacrifice which in their situation is two turtle doves for they were poor people. In the Temple Christ was carried in the arms of the Righteous Simeon and watched over by the Prophetess Anna. This Feast is more proof that the Son of God truly became human. On this day Jesus, the infant, not a spirit or an angel, is brought to the Temple.

These meetings with Simeon and Anna and the Saviour are why this Feast has another name, not least amongst our Orthodox brothers and sisters: 'The Meeting of the Lord'. According to tradition, Simeon in understanding the words in the seventh chapter of Isaiah the Prophet, had been awestruck by the affirmation that a Virgin would give birth. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would live until he saw these words fulfilled. At today's encounter with the infant Jesus, the fulfillment of these words, Simeon, who is not necessarily old, utters the words: 'Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy words, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel'. Soon after uttering these words the Righteous Anna meets Jesus for she too had been waiting to see the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit that she would see the Messiah in great old age. The Prayer of St Simeon, often known by its Latin beginning "Nunc Dimittis", is said and sung regularly at Evening Prayer and Evensong in the Anglican tradition while it is read at every Vespers service in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church Year. It is also an entirely appropriate set of words to be said or sung at a funeral.

According to the Old Testament, the Jews were commanded to present their male children at the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after their Birth. This was to give thanks to God and pray for the purification of the mother and health of the child, for it was considered that after a forty-day period it was almost certain that all mortal danger was passed. For this reason, the Feast is also called 'The Purification of the Virgin'. This is why, although this Feast is a Feast which honours Our Lord it also

gives great honour to the Mother of Jesus. Indeed, some might say this Feast is the Feast of all mothers.

In our New Testament times, we used to have the custom of 'churching', which is similar to this rite of purification of the mother, which was carried out in the Old Testament. In the Book of Common Prayer, you will find a service for the Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called the Churching of Women. Amongst our Orthodox brothers and sisters, it remains important for all children, not only boys, are to be presented in church at the age of forty days, when they are presented for baptism and chrismation, and thereby made ready for holy communion. At these services, prayers are said over the mother at this critical time; firstly in thanksgiving for the physical safety of the mother, but also for the spiritual safety of the mother. Some might suggest even, in order to ward off what is now called 'post-natal depression'.

Candlemas, the fourth name, was given to this Feast in memory of the Roman custom of lighting candles at it, which recalls the lights in the Temple at Jerusalem. The custom spread from Rome, even to western parts of Russia, and in the Russian service-books there is a prayer for the blessing of candles on this day. In some countries, Candlemas is connected with many popular sayings concerning weatherlore, witnessing to the popularity of Candlemas in olden times. One such saying for example is: 'If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter shall have another flight'. This means that if today's weather is good, we shall have more cold and wintry weather before the Spring.

I hope the above information has been of interest, even revelatory! Toward the end of this service, while saying or singing the "Nunc Dimittis", those special utterances of Simeon, we will enact something of the customs of Candlemas by processing out with a candle not only so we might bring light to this Church, but so we will go out reminded that we are called to bring the light of Christ to all who live in this community into which God has called us to be his apostles of his peace, love, joy, justice, and hope!

A significant question for each of us is "what does this Feast mean for us today?" Since it is now forty plus two days since Christmas, it is time for us to think about the last forty plus two days and ask ourselves some questions: What can we present today to the Temple of Christ, the Church? In what condition do we present our souls to Christ? What sacrifices have we made in the last forty plus two days? Have we begun cultivating a new virtue? Have we attempted to give up an old vice? Have we taken communion? Have we read our prayers? Have we set a Christian example to our neighbours? Have we thanked God for all that we have received? What has changed in our way of life since the Birth of Christ forty plus two days ago? What progress has been made?

Whatever our answers to these questions, on this, the Feast of the Meeting of Christ, let us be reminded of our need to be spiritually prepared so to meet Christ.