

St Brandon's, Sermon for 2nd February 2020.
Malachi 3:1-5, Hebrews 2:14-end, Luke 2:22-40
Candlemas and moving East.
Alison Hobbs

I have a number of questions about today's service – or rather, I've been asked a few questions, and have a few more, of my own.

For instance: is this Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple?

Are they the same thing?

And when we were discussing whether to use this service booklet, with candles, and moving to the high altar for the Eucharist, Anna asked,

“Why do we move forward, anyway?”

Good question: I haven't the foggiest – Ewan put this service together when he was an ordinand here, and as Deborah observed, “He liked moving around.”

And that's before we even start asking questions about where scripture takes us today.

Well, I did come up with some answers to the first questions: The feast originated in Jerusalem and was celebrated in the Byzantine Church as the *hypapante*, which means ‘meeting’: the meeting of the Old with the New:

Simeon and Anna, not only old in years but representing the old order, meet with Jesus and his parents, the new baby, and recognise the heralding in of the new order.

The feast of meeting.

The common title, Candlemas, according to a theology book I consulted, stems from Simeon hailing Jesus as ‘a light to lighten

the Gentiles', using candles to represent 'The True Light'. However, the BBC religion webpage reckoned it was called Candlemas because this was the day that all the Church's candles for the year were blessed, which sounds to me, a practical use of a pre-existing festival, already called Candlemas – but that's just my hunch, you can take whichever answer you like...

Indeed, you may have other explanations for the name because many of our Christian festivals grew out of pagan origins, and the lengthening of the day, the return of the light, was much celebrated for its own merit before Christianity arrived and wisely over-laid elements of the deeply embedded pagan ways with Christian understanding.

The title 'Presentation of Christ in the Temple' is the Common Worship name for the feast, based on the story we hear today, of Christ being presented in the temple. So that is its more 'churchy' name. However, even that is a pretty recent churchy name: the Book of Common Prayer, which is what we used for 400 or so years, called this feast the 'Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary', putting the emphasis on Mary's part in this story.

This all got more complicated than I expected, and I'm no church historian, so corrections, complexities, correlations and customs can be fed to me over coffee!

However, it does allow me to point out that this feast has gone through a number of changes and Ewan changing it for us is part of the evolution. Which brings me to the second question, 'Why do we move forward?'

I'll come back to some thoughts about that but want at this stage to just comment on the broadest reason, which is, to help us

enter physically, with our bodies and our senses, into the worship of today.

Ewan was drawing on material written fifteen years ago, intended to help enrich and reclaim our understanding of church seasons – a movement that has been particularly happening over the last thirty years and which St Brandon's was quick to embrace.

This whole cycle we do each year as we go through Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc. is designed to help us focus on one aspect at a time of the whole big story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit – its all contained in every service we hold but the focus changes so we can absorb and understand it better – so its more digestible.

And to make it more digestible, for a lot of people, that can mean seeing it, hearing it, tasting, touching and smelling the elements of the story. Hence images and colours for hangings and our clothing, which change season to season. Oils, ashes, crosses, flowers – and absence of flowers – music and words that capture mood as well as telling stories.

This is the stuff of poets, not of logic and science.

We absorb it consciously and unconsciously each service.

It's intended to help us enter more fully into the events we are recalling.

Because its not just a simple recalling, re-telling of an old, historic happening, it is recalling and entering into the mystery of our living God and living faith.

When we worship, we are entering God's time, and God's time is different to our time:

We understand time as linear, running from Creation to the Last Day; we have it as 'yesterday, today and tomorrow'.

But God operates outside time: every time and every place is now and evermore, for God.

When we worship we enter into God's time and are being invited not just to remember these faith events but are invited to enter into them, to be part of them. To bring what is there, in God's dimension into our present, to effect us.

So when we move up to the high altar, we are moving with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem, we are moving to the Temple, we are moving East from whence comes the dawning of the light in Advent, moving nearer to God.

We are moving with Mary and Joseph to present ourselves, praying to be presented to God for his service, moving toward the altar where Jesus is now the sacrifice that will purify and refine us.

Layer upon layer of meanings and invitations to go deeper, and find more.

We started with candles, receiving the light from the altar as a symbol of Christ, the true light, and asking him to help us acknowledge our darkness and become children of light, and then rejoicing in the words of the Gloria for all that He is and will do. Because in that moment, we are offered again – and each time is as if for the first time – the gift of Christ, born in us.

Okay, I appreciate not everyone is tuned into this sort of liturgical realism, it doesn't do it for everyone, though I know many, coming from other traditions, have been drawn deeply into these liturgies over the repeating years.

And I for one, am grateful to Ewan for this legacy which fits our current patterns well.

Did you notice in the introduction, that it is forty days since Christmas?

That was the law of Moses, that after forty days, the mother of a male child offered sacrifice as an act of cleansing herself, just the woman, although Joseph accompanied her so they could present the new baby, as the firstborn male, to the Lord in that same visit to the temple.

These were the normal customs of ordinary, faithful Jews, they didn't think they were doing anything very remarkable until suddenly, Simeon materialises and announces the baby as the long awaited messiah.

And then Anna tells everyone around her about the child and the redemption of Jerusalem.

This is a key moment when we hear the change from the Old covenant to the New covenant, and also, see the *continuity* between the Old covenant and the New covenant: where the faith of the women to the traditions of Moses, and the need for animal sacrifice to bring about cleansing are overtaken by the prophesy of the new, and final purification that Jesus will achieve, removing all impurity from women and those outside the Law – that's us Gentiles, for all time, with his own sacrifice of himself.

Today points back to the old and forwards to the new.

Today also marks the end of Christmastide (my mother followed the tradition that, having missed the twelfth night, it was fine to keep Christmas decorations up until today, Candlemas).

So, we look back to the birth of Jesus, and the importance and significance of his coming as the light into the world, and of his sharing flesh and blood with us.

Then, at the presentation, and with the baby Jesus in his arms, Simeon points us towards the Passion: Jesus's sharing of our suffering, and his overturning of it; Simeon's prophesy to Mary of the turbulence around her child's future, and the sword that will pierce her soul.

Today points us back to Christmas and forwards to the passion.

So it feels very appropriate that we should move, after the Peace, into the chancel, where we will gather every day of Holy Week, to share the story of the Passion, and share Jesus' journey to Jerusalem with the bitter-sweet taste of Candlemas in our mouths.

But that is ahead of us still.

Today, we are to present ourselves with Mary and Joseph and the infant saviour, to be challenged and strengthened by partaking in Christ's offering of himself, and, receiving his blessing, return to our ordinary time, and Lent, to grow in understanding.

Just as Mary had to grow in understanding.

Just as the infant Jesus disappears from the narrative, to grow and become strong, filled with wisdom; and may the favour of God be upon us, as it was upon him.

Amen