

## Candlemas 2017

In around 380 AD a Spanish nun known as Egeria travelled to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. She wrote letters back to her communities, her 'Dear Ladies' as she addressed them. Some of her writings remain extant and we have learnt much from her about the celebration of Holy Week and Easter in the early church. The Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin was also mentioned in her writings. This ancient feast that we celebrate together this morning is now better known as The Presentation of Christ in the Temple or Candlemas. Egeria wrote of this feast: *But certainly the Feast of the Purification is celebrated here with the greatest honour. On this day there is a procession to the Anastasis; all go in procession, and all things are done in order with great joy, just as at Easter. All the priests preach, and also the bishop, always treating of that passage of the Gospel where, on the fortieth day, Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Famuhel, saw Him, and of the words which they said when they saw the Lord, and of the offerings which the parents presented. And when all things have been celebrated in order as is customary, the sacrament is administered, and so the people are dismissed.*

Other than the Holy Family the central characters in this story are Simeon and Anna and it has been known as Candlemas through the centuries because of the words of Simeon describing Jesus: a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Today we live in a very different world from the one of Simeon and Anna, one in which there is a cult of youth. All around us we see signs, advertisements, magazines, offering us ways of staying young, people will spend a great deal of time and money on the latest treatments to look younger. Botox is all the rage!

One of the most important of our ministries in the church, and it is an important part of the ministry of St Philip's, is the care of the older members of our community. We are called to the care of all those who are most vulnerable in our community and that includes the unborn, the young, the disabled or disadvantaged, the displaced, the asylum seeker, but particularly those of advanced years...we called to the creation of a society in which there are no victims. This is central to our Jewish Christian heritage so it is significant that in this feast we come across two elderly folk. Simeon and Anna, they are religious folk; Simeon is described by Luke as an upright and devout man and Anna who, we are told, is 84 years old has been a widow for many years and serves the Lord day and night with fasting and prayer.

Simeon has been promised that he will not die until he seen the Lord's Christ, and so when he takes Jesus in his arms we hear him speak those lovely words that we call the *Nunc dimittis*:  
Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word.  
For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation,  
Which thou hast prepared: before the face of all people;  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...' Simeon could now rest reassured that God's Christ had come. God has a habit of saving the best till last, as he did at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee as he did for Simeon and Anna as he does for many of us. As Robert Browning wrote in his poem Rabbi Ben Ezra "*Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in his hand who saith, 'A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!'*"

Advancing years may bring with them aching bones, loneliness or grief, indeed Simeon warned Mary of the grief she would experience in her advancing years - a sword will pierce your own soul too, but it can also bring wisdom, peace, acceptance, rest, understanding and it is the calling of the church to care for the older members of our community to allow them to realise these joys. So we advance together caring for one another in the faith of Christ the light, the light that enlightens us all. This feast is all about life; is a parable of life. Through the lives of Simeon and Anna it teaches us patience and perseverance in the face of adversity, hope in the face of hopelessness, it is an object lesson in faith, it is all about life from death. It reminds us that as we approach the season of Lent and as the cross begins to cast its shadow that our way is always lit by Christ the light of the world, who always saves the best until last. *“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.”*