

Candlemas 2018

Today we close our Christmas festivities. Candlemas acts as a sort of a hinge between Christmas and Holy Week; today our focus turns from the crib to the cross. There are hints of this in our readings. The child who is brought into the Temple ‘comes in judgement’ according to the Prophet Malachi and in Luke’s Gospel Simeon the old man in the temple speaks those fateful words to Mary ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too;’ so it’s a bittersweet commemoration in many ways. On one level it represents, a sort of shift from the old represented by Simeon and Anna and the worship of the Temple, this vast edifice speaking of the awesome might of the God of the Hebrews, to the new – the Christ, the embodiment of the new temple and the God who comes in vulnerability. This is a cultural and theological shift of monumental proportions. Simeon has been waiting for this shift for many years and at last as he sees the beginning of this movement he speaks those famous words: *Lord give your servant his discharge, now I can go, my life has come to a point of fulfillment and I can let go.* What a bittersweet moment for the old man.

What we are dealing with I believe is a distinctively Christian theme that of paradox. The hinge, which is Candlemas, is all about paradox. Simeon and Anna for whom the temple was everything, these two elderly people – representations of time, suddenly discover that meaning is to be found not in the temple but in this small child and his rather poor parents, a child who is God – eternal. Time and eternity meet and in their coming together we glimpse our salvation. This is paradox writ large - it is not something that we are particularly good at, but the Christian faith by its very nature requires of us to hold in tension competing ideas.

Susan and I thoroughly enjoyed our break away in January. It was still cool and we enjoyed being indoors. Surely there is nowhere better to be indoors than in Europe. The Gothic architecture of Westminster Abbey, Canterbury Cathedral or Notre Dame never fails to amaze. Those towering pillars and glorious stone vaults are truly wonders. The later styles with their domes at Sacre Coeur, and the London Oratory that appear to float are equally impressive. What the architects were endeavouring to do was to present paradox in stone. Those medieval folk entering the naves of the great cathedrals would have seen but barely believed. How is it that such vaults can exist? Even today with our extraordinary knowledge such buildings elicit gasps from even the most hardened cynic. Surely we are entering heaven itself!

The theologians and scholars suggest that the Biblical tradition and Christian thought can be summed up in one word...nevertheless. The

Christian tradition is a human nevertheless to God. At the end of the prophet Habbakuk we read: Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, *nevertheless* I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. This is the proper response to God's nevertheless to humanity which Paul writes of in Romans: For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸ Nevertheless God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

I read recently that we should consider true religion as openness to the 'unmanipulated mystery of life.' The writer goes on God is not a "supernatural being" somewhere in the wings of the visible world, but a mystery that is the depths and foundation of all reality. Therefore instead of speaking of the "Kingdom of God," I refer to the "kingdom of the impossible," because it consists of much that rightly appears to human intellect, human imagination and everyday experience as *impossible and unimaginable*.

In many life situations Jesus wants us to act "impossibly" in terms of the logic "of this world," which is a world of cunning, selfishness and violence. He wants us to forgive where we could take vengeance, to give where we could keep for ourselves, to love those who do not love us and are not "lovable," to take action in favour of the poor who cannot pay us back, when we could, calmly and unperturbed, continue to lounge around in our pleasantly cozy indifference and detachment.

Jesus is not content with dazzling us with spectacular miracles, fascinating visions and signs, as others have done and continue to do; He wants us to imitate Him, to be *agents of the impossible*: "whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father."

Only faith, love and hope, which are the heart of the Christian existence, can offer this new opportunity where, with human eyes, we have ceased to expect it: hope in the Christian sense, says the apostle Paul in one of his many paradoxical statements, means "hoping against hope." This is because they are based on a great paradox preached by Jesus of Nazareth (and which permeates the entire Bible): what is impossible with people is possible with God.

Candlemas is the festival of potential, a light to lighten the gentiles. That potential is realised when we engage with the paradox of our faith epitomised at Candlemas when we look back to the crib and new life walk into the shadow of the cross and life anew. Amen.