

The Parish of Christchurch

*The Priory Church of the Holy Trinity, Christchurch
St George, Jumpers • St John at Purewell*



For January 31st, 2020

Dear Friends,

This Sunday the Church celebrates one of the most significant, though sometimes overlooked, Festivals of Jesus Christ. Formally, its name is “The Presentation of Christ in the Temple”, more traditionally, Candlemas. The actual date of Candlemas is February 2nd, exactly forty days after Christmas; which means that those of you who come to our Zoom Morning Prayer get to celebrate it twice!

I must be honest: one of the reasons I love Candlemas is because, as a rule, February is my least favourite month in the year. For other, January holds that unenviable honour; but for me there has always been something dispiriting about February, yet another month of winter, with little to commend it, other than to hold out for the fulfilment of the promise of Spring.

This year, the impact of the pandemic is making these long winter months even more demanding than usual. In the past week, the number of those who have died from Covid-19, according to the official figures, passed the 100,000 mark – each one a name, not a number; each known, cherished, and now sadly missed. Hospital wards are full, the numbers of Covid patients far higher than at the first peak of the pandemic last year, their staff more hard-pressed than ever. Other professions, not least our teachers, are also working in abnormally stressful conditions. Dark times indeed.

Perhaps, then, in this year of grace, we need the multi-layered truths and images of Candlemas more than ever. Candlemas is a festival of light set in the darkness of deep winter, an annual reminder of the unquenchable light of Christ. The Candlemas Gospel includes the *Nunc Dimittis*, in which Simeon hails the infant Jesus as ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’: in this of all years, may it remind us that the light of Christ shines even when all seems dark around. If you intend to watch this Sunday’s online service, you might like to have a candle beside you, to light near the end of the service, as we would normally do in church.

Candlemas also confirms that God keeps his promises. Luke 2 tells us that Simeon had been promised that, before he died, he would see the Messiah; which is why his great song of praise begins, ‘Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.’ We shall never know if Simeon was ever tempted to doubt the promise, as any of us might have done. What we do know is that when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the Temple that day, Simeon was still watching and waiting, ready for the revelation of Israel’s hope and ours. That speaks of a deep faith and trust in God – a faith that, even though we cannot know God’s timing, nevertheless trusts God with our death as with our life.

Candlemas may also speak to us with particular power this year precisely because it re-directs our attention towards the coming weeks of Lent and Holy Week. That day in the Temple, when Mary and Joseph probably thought they were just fulfilling the requirements of the Mosaic law, the young mother is told that ‘a sword will pierce your heart too’; and so it did, as she watched her son hanging from the cross. Far from being unmitigated comfort, then, let alone an excuse for escapism, Candlemas shows that the path ahead may be tough and that to take this way will be costly: the Way of the Cross always is, so costly that only if we know that God is with us will we find the courage to embark on it.

Normally, the Candlemas invitation is to walk with Christ through the coming weeks of preparation, self-examination, penitence and self-denial. This year, it may help to turn that round, and realize that it is Christ who walks with us, each and every step of our journey through this pandemic, and beyond: for he has promised to be with us always.

As we journey from Candlemas to Lent, perhaps we can pray this simple pilgrim's prayer together:

Lord Jesus, walk with me today. Show me how to live with faith, hope and love,
and with the freedom you promised. Help me to live love and compassion.
Shine your light in me, and help me to trust you every step of the way. Amen.

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Heidi Haagensen will be leaving us on February 14, to go on to her new post at . We want to give Heidi a tangible token of our thanks for the outstanding job she has done in the parish since her arrival in May 2018. To make a contribution to her leaving gift, please follow the following guidance:

- **by bank transfer**, please use: Account Name - P.C.C. of Christchurch No.2 Account; Sort Code 52-21-34; Account Number 52428001.
- Please use "Heidi" as the reference and email Ian Penny on prioryhouse@christchurchpriory.org,
- **by cheque**: please make cheques payable to P.C.C of Christchurch No.2. Account and mark for Ian's attention. If posted, to Priory House, Quay Road, BH23 1BU. Whether by post or by hand, please clearly mark "Heidi" on or in the envelope.
- **by cash**: please put in an envelope for Ian and bring to the Priory, clearly marked as above.

Thank you.

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Following last Sunday's farewell to Jonathan and Alice Evans, Jonathan has asked me to include these words:

"Alice and I would like to thank you all for giving us such a good send-off as we move to Bruton. Despite not being able to be together and see each other, we were very aware of your presence with us in thought and prayer. Thank you again for your many cards and messages and also for the astonishingly generous gift that will provide the beautiful Peter Eugene Ball sculpture of Mary. We look forward to sending you a photo of her when she is installed in the Bruton Rectory. With much love to you all, Jonathan & Alice."

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Some pieces of music 'fit' one day in the year. One such is "When to the Temple Mary went", a simple, unostentatious anthem by the German composer, Johannes Eccard (1553-1611), which I try to play every Candlemas. The English text reads:

When to the Temple Mary went And brought the Holy Child, Him did the aged Simeon see, As it had been revealed, He took up Jesus in his arms And, blessing God, he said: In peace I now depart, my Saviour having seen, The Hope of Israel, the Light of Men.	Help now Thy servants, gracious Lord, That they may ever be As once the faithful Simeon was, Rejoicing but in Thee; And when we must from earth departure take, Departure take, May gently fall asleep And with Thee wake.
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Since 2000, Anglican clergy have been encouraged to include a "Prayer for Readiness to Live in the Light of Eternity" in every funeral. This kind of thinking may not fit comfortably with the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, not least because it takes the long-term (indeed, the eternal) view; and yet, this perspective reflects the hope that has been intrinsic to Christian faith from the beginning.

To my mind, that second verse meets this requirement: it roots our relationship with God both in the here and now and in the eternal life which is His promise in Christ, seamlessly. With this perspective in our minds, hearts and imaginations, we may perhaps live more fully in that peace which passes human understanding, no matter how challenging our circumstances. Truly, God is here, His Spirit is with us.

With every blessing,

