

## **St David's – 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

### **Luke 2:22-40 and Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-22**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Lord God. Amen.

I love the Candlemas story. It is my absolute favourite story to preach on, so the rota here at St David's has worked out rather well for me, hasn't it?

I love Candlemas, chiefly, for the drama of it all. Candlemas is the moment in the liturgical year when we turn our eyes from all the joy and celebration of the Christmas season and look towards the season of Lent. It is the moment when the baby in the manger dwells in the shadow of the cross.

It's the moment the Christmas story becomes more than a nice story about a little baby. As we read the Candlemas story we realise Jesus' purpose and his mission. And as Mary and Joseph walk through the story, I think they realise it too.

The events at Bethlehem are still fresh for Mary and Joseph. Parents would have brought children to the Temple when they were 40 days old. So it's only been in the last six weeks that all this has happened. The journey, birth, the visit from the shepherds – and perhaps from the wise men also. Mary and Joseph are still getting used to parenthood.

And they've had a long journey to the temple. Assuming they've hung around in Bethlehem and come straight from there, they've travelled about 6 miles. That's

like us setting out from St David's and having a bit of a walk up the Exe Valley road as far as just beyond Rewe. Far enough with a 6 week old baby, I think. But, actually, Mary and Joseph may not have come straight from Bethlehem, they may have gone home to Nazareth in between, and the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem is about 70 miles. Or like us walking to Weston-Super-Mare. They've come a long way.

They've come for two reasons. First, to dedicate Jesus to the Lord. Second, for Mary's purification. In their actions, there is a sense of duty to law and tradition.

But if they expected their time in the Temple to be traditional, they were quite wrong. Nothing has been usual about the birth of this child. And as the elderly Simeon approaches, Mary and Joseph know that something strange is happening. Simeon takes the child in his arms. And then he says these extraordinary words. Words which many know best from the Book of Common Prayer:

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.

And Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about him. Well, you would, wouldn't you? Salvation, light, glory. So far, so good.

But if we know the Book of Common Prayer Nunc Dimittis - perhaps we miss Simeon's closing words. "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."

I wonder what Mary thought about this? I am sure that she, like any Mother, desperately wanted her little baby to have a lovely life. But already she knows that there is something special about this child, something that will mark his life and hers, both with glory and with pain.

I love the lines that conclude our passage. It's taken us nearly two chapters of Luke's gospel to get to Jesus' 40<sup>th</sup> day. Then those three words "the child grew" take Luke's gospel narrative forward a whole 12 years. I wonder what those years were like for Mary? I wonder if she ever dwelt upon Simeon's glorious and forboding words?

She could not ignore the darkness that Jesus will have to go through to accomplish what he has come to do. His ministry will be to shine as a light in places of darkness, and none more so than that dark day on the cross. And for Mother Mary, as she watched her child grow, she knew that she too must step into dark and difficult places. When she handed her little baby to Simeon in the Temple, that would be the first of many times she would be letting go of that child. This was a child who would run away from her at the age of 12, a man who, later in his ministry, would say publicly "who is my Mother?" Always letting go. And for Mary, hers was a letting go that would culminate as she

stood in the shadow of the cross, when a sword would pierce her own heart and his.

So what do we take from this? From this mingling of bitter and sweet, as we look upon a baby who brings light, but whose future is painful.

Well, first, as we look upon this baby, we are aware of the gravity of the Christian journey that we follow. The light Jesus brings isn't like twinkly Christmas lights, up one minute, gone the next. It's a light that is both precious and profound.

And above all, as we look upon this baby who means so much, we stand in wonder. Wonder of a God who would become a baby. Wonder at one who made the universe and would lie in the arms of a young Mother. And wonder that He, Almighty God, would be the one prepared to die and rise again to bring about that light.

Amen.