

Candlemas 2016 Choral Evensong

Haggai 2: 1 – 9; John 2: 18 – 22

Toda we celebrate Candlemas. Actually Candlemas is on Tuesday, 2nd February, but we celebrate it today, being the closest Sunday. The 2nd February is one of those dates in the calendar that is used for a Christian festival, yet pre-dates Christianity. Christianity comes along and syncretises itself with the mystical cycle of the year. It assimilates existing pagan festivals into the Christian calendar as it emerges as the dominant channel of mystical truth.

So, there's a midwinter pagan festival on 25th December and it gets adopted as Christmas Day – a bit of a funny day to adopt to celebrate a story that's set in lambing season, you might think, but we don't bother to think; because none of us questions that December 25th is the day on which Jesus was born. The 2nd February was a pagan festival, too. In fact there are two pagan connections with February 2nd. As well as

being the Christian festival of Candlemas, 2nd February is also St. Brigid's Day. But *Saint* Brigid is thought to be a Christianisation of the pagan goddess Brigid. Perhaps more importantly, 2nd February is also the pagan festival of Imbolc, the festival when pagans celebrate the recovery of the goddess after giving birth to the god.

And Candlemas, also, is a festival of purification. The main story of Candlemas that we read in this morning's services, the story of the presentation of the Christ child in the temple and Simeon uttering the words of the Nunc Dimitis, as well as being a story about the *child* being presented, in order to be consecrated to God, is a story about the mother, Mary, going to be purified. But guess what. The Jewish custom required that the post-natal ritual of purification took place 40 days after the birth. And the pagan festival of Imbolc is – guess when – 40 days after the pagan festival adopted by Christians to

celebrate the birth of Jesus. 2nd February is 40 days after 25th December.

From a Christian perspective, there are two ways of looking at this syncretism of Christianity with the pagan mystical cycle. There is undoubtedly some force in the concern that it relativises Christianity and erodes the truth claims that Christianity makes. If we're not careful the God we meet in Jesus just becomes one god among a whole gang – a god with a small g rather God almighty with a big G. The truth that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is much, much more than just another god emerges early on in the development of Old Testament thought.

Think of Elijah and the trials of the prophets of Baal. That's First Book of Kings. Elijah challenges the prophets to invoke the Baals to consume the sacrifices in flames. Of course they can't. Elijah taunts them that perhaps their gods have had to turn aside. It's a euphemism for going to the toilet. The taunt is that

these gods are so subject to mortal frailty that they have to break off when they get caught short; and they can't concentrate whilst they're having a jimmy-riddle. In contrast, the God of Elijah, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God we meet in Jesus Christ, is God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth in whom and through whom we have our very being. And we don't want to compromise on that.

On the other hand, although Christianity represents the ultimate truth, it expresses that through a human thought system and articulates it through human language. And when I see the attempts to express eternal truths of other thought systems coming up with things that are congruent with Christianity, I don't see that as rivalling Christianity: I see it as corroborating Christianity.

There is a mystical cycle to the year. We meet God by observing that cycle. We observe that cycle by following the church's calendar. This is the time of

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year when there is something spiritually natural about turning round. We turn from looking back at mid-winter to looking forward to spring. We turn from looking back at Christmas to looking forward to Easter. We turn from the crib to the cross.

But the distinctive, truth-bearing insight that our faith bears witness to is that what we are turning towards is more than the new life of fresh daffodils and spring chicks: it is the resurrection life that comes out of our Lord's Passion - his suffering, that sword that Simeon told his mother would pierce her heart, that destruction of the temple that was his body of which we hear Jesus speaking in St. John's Gospel this evening.

When Jesus used that metaphor it confused the Jewish leaders he was speaking to. The Temple – the physical building in Jerusalem – was where the Ark of the Lord was kept: it housed God. Jesus is God incarnate; he is God assuming a life of flesh and blood; his body

houses God. Therefore his body is like the Temple. And, although it will be destroyed, in three days it will be raised up.

And this Temple thinking about Jesus throws us back to the human involvement in building the Temple in Jerusalem. It throws us back to the prophet Haggai from whom we also heard this evening. The book of Haggai, just two chapters long, taking up less than one double page of print in most editions of the Bible. Haggai speaks to the community he serves, 500 years before Christ, of the absolute imperative of prioritising building the Temple. Money's short and there's a temptation to think that religion is a bit of a frivolity that can only be indulged when more pressing economic matters have been addressed. But Haggai says no: there is an imperative to serve God and everything else will follow from that; the Temple will get built and will be splendid.

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As we turn from the crib to the cross this Candlemas,
we are invited to contemplate our Lord's suffering.
But that is not a passive contemplation. It is costly.
Love's endeavour is love's expense. It is only through
involving ourselves in the costly life of God that
resurrection life can be known.

AmenE