

Candlemas 2018 – Choral Evensong

Haggai 2: 1 – 9; John 2: 13 – 22

Today we celebrate Candlemas, the day we turn from the crib to the cross. The main story of the day is Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the Temple and old Simeon and Anna recognising that he is not just some provincial baby, but none other than the Christ. You might call Candlemas “Nunc Dimitis Day” because, of course, what Simeon says when he beholds the Christ are the words that are recited, either as spoken words or set to music, every day at Evensong. So the theme of the day is summed up in the words “Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people: a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people, Israel.”

Candlemas is the final Sunday in Epiphany, final both in the sense of it being the last in the series, but also in the sense of it being the climactic culmination of the season. This is the ultimate revelation, the ultimate

epiphanal experience: Jesus = salvation; and Jesus = salvation for everyone and anyone.

Of course, we’ve not read that story this evening. This evening’s readings have been peripheral to that story; because Evensong is peripheral – an essential part of our spiritual discipline, but peripheral, ancillary to the core celebration which was as we gathered for the Candlemas Eucharist, at which the story was proclaimed as the Gospel reading.

What we need to work out, then, is how the readings we have had this evening serve that story peripherally, how they surround and wrap up the main thrust of the narrative of the story of the presentation of Christ in the Temple.

Well, Haggai – the first reading – is easy. It reminds us that Jesus still represents a future promise. Just as Haggai was looking forward to what God *will* do. It’s a question of “I *will* shake the heavens and the earth;” “I

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will shake all nations;” “I *will* fill this house with splendour.” The prophecy is looking forward, with conviction to be sure, but looking forward to what is yet to happen.

For Simeon, in the Temple, it had all happened. He had seen it. Everything had been completed: he could die secure in the knowledge that there had been complete fulfilment of his life’s longing.

For Christians it’s a bit of both/and. The assurance of faith is the gift of the Spirit upon the promises of Jesus being accepted. We know Jesus for now. He is really present with us. There is a new life, a new beginning. Everything has changed. And yet it hasn’t. There’s still famine and warfare; I still swear at the cat; and there’s still everything else in between those two ends of the scale. It is not yet. It’s both now and not yet. Simeon’s story expresses the now bit; and Haggai reinforces the not yet bit.

The cleansing of the Temple in John 2, though, is rather more difficult to look at through a Candlemas lens. That is until you learn – and I don’t think I did know this until I prepared this sermon – that traditionally this reading has been taken as symbolic of the purification of candidates in preparation for their baptism on Easter eve. This is a story about purification. Candlemas is the story of Mary and Joseph presenting themselves at the Temple when “the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses.” This story, the cleansing of the Temple, helps us to pick up the theme of purification as we turn from the crib to the cross. It prizes us away from consideration of Christmas and Epiphany – where it would be so lovely and convenient for us to sit and dwell – and propels us towards and through the cross. Simeon and Anna are the last story of Christmas. Now we really are moving on from it.

And what we are being propelled towards is our union with Christ as members of his body, believing we’ve

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now, already, become a new temple. When Jesus said – as we've heard this evening – “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” he was, as we know, speaking of the temple of his body, the body of which we are members because we all share in one bread.

It is this assurance, the assurance that we participate in the resurrection life, which equips us to live with the tension of recognising, with Haggai, that everything still needs shaking up.

Amen.