

Candlemas 2019 (3.02.19)

Malachi 3: 1 – 5; Luke 2: 22 – 40

This week just past has been the coldest week of the winter do far. I probably don't need to remind anybody that Wednesday night into Thursday morning was exceptionally cold: -15, not in Brid, but in parts of Scotland; but still about -5 in Brid; and a really stubborn frost to scrape off the car before we could take the dogs out onto the cliff tops at Sewerby.

All of which, actually, rather undermines the way I want to start this sermon. Because the way I want to start is by saying – despite all evidence to the contrary – that spring is on its way. But actually, spring is on its way. Everything is just waiting to happen; it's a pregnant moment before life will burst out again: snowdrops are already out; lambing season starts up at Grange Farm this week; and the mornings are getting lighter. And as we've been the dogs in the morning, the fraternity of dog walkers on the cliff tops,

just this week, have been commenting that there's a perceptible change, morning by morning as light returns.

In fact we are precisely half way between the shortest day and the spring equinox. And long before Christianity arrived, there was a pagan festival at this mid-way point. It was called Imbolc. And Imbolc means pregnant. Imbolc is traditionally the great festival that honours Brigid, so loved as a pagan Goddess that her worship was woven into the Christian church as St Bridget. It was believed she brought fertility both to land and people. So just as Christmas is a weaving together – or syncretism – of the Christian story and the pagan midwinter festival, so Candlemas that we celebrate today is wove together with the pagan festival of Imbolc, the festival that turned from the darkness of winter to look towards the light of spring.

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In the bible story of Candlemas, the story we've just heard proclaimed this morning – the story of Mary and Joseph taking the baby Jesus to the Temple and being met by these two old people, Simeon and Anna – in this story of Candlemas, Jesus is described by Simeon as light. He recognises Jesus as the light for all nations. He recognises him as the light for all people, for everybody. And he tells Mary that what lies ahead for her is anguish and pain – anguish and pain like a sword going through her own heart – as she journeys through Jesus' life with him from the crib to the cross.

You see we've had a wonderful Christmas and Epiphany here at the Priory. We've had some marvellous services: we've had bumper congregations and the choir have been on cracking form. But you see it's no good just to gaze sentimentally on that crib and never to move on from it. We become spiritually stunted if we don't allow Jesus to draw us from that crib into lives of self-denial, feeding the hungry,

clothing the naked, sitting with people in their prisons and allowing ourselves to be taken all the way to that cross.

One of my standard school assemblies at this time of year is to take a carrier bag of all the nativity costumes into school. Except I do two things: I miss out the baby Jesus and I slip in a pair of my own, adult sized jeans. So I ask the children to think back to the Christmas story; and I rummage in my bag; and I come out with a blue slip; and we decide that perhaps Mary would wear that; so someone comes out and dresses up as Mary. Then we find a shepherd's outfit; then, perhaps, an angel's. I then I rummage about in my bag and I pull out my jeans; and I pretend I'm embarrassed and thrown them to one side; and we carry on pulling out turbans and cloaks and all the rest of it.

Eventually we have the tableau and I announce to the children that we've recreated the Christmas story. But

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they call out that we haven't because we've missed out the baby Jesus. So I go rummaging about in my bag again and I can't find the baby Jesus, but then I pick up my adult sized jeans. And I tell the children that perhaps I haven't forgotten Jesus. Because Jesus wasn't born as a baby in order to stay a baby. He was born in order to grow and get bigger and bigger until he could fit into these jeans. And as we grow he wants to grow with us and take us on amazing journeys of love and compassion.

Compassion. It means suffering with. Jesus wants to suffer with us; and he calls us to suffer with him. As we turn from the crib, it's our prayer that we will be empowered by his Spirit to walk in his shoes, or perhaps even his jeans, to endure the life of service to which he calls us and to make it all the way to the cross . . . and beyond.

Amen.