

Candlemas 2020 (02.02.2020)

Hebrews 2: 14 – end; Luke 2: 22 - 40

Toda we celebrate the Christian festival of Candlemas. The 2nd February is one of those dates in the calendar that is used for a Christian festival, yet pre-dates Christianity. That's what Christianity often does. It comes along and syncretises itself with the mystical cycle of the year. Historically, it assimilated existing pagan festivals into the Christian calendar as it emerged 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. And perhaps more importantly, 2nd February is also the pagan festival of Imbolc, the festival when pagans celebrate the recovery – or the purification - of the goddess after giving birth to the god.

And Candlemas, also, is a festival of purification. The main story of Candlemas, that we've just read, is the story of the presentation of the Christ child in the temple and Simeon uttering the words that are called the Nunc Dimittis. But there are two parts to it: as well as being a story about the *child* being presented, in order to be consecrated to God, it is also a story about the mother, Mary, going to be purified. And 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 of gods – a god with a small g rather God almighty with a big G; whereas the truth that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is much, much more than just another god emerged early on in the development of Old Testament thought.

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 attempts to express eternal truths in 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 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 Jesus' suffering – suffering, that sword that Simeon told Jesus' mother would pierce her heart.

Over the last four years, during the Brexit referendum campaign and in its aftermath, the United Kingdom

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has suffered. There have been shameful untruths and half-truths, racism and xenophobia. Simplistic slogans have taken the place of thoughtful and respectful debate. But the Christian festival of Candlemas gives us hope. As we turn from winter to spring; as we turn from the crib to the cross, we are also invited to turn from the bitterness and division and mistrust and down-right hatred, that have characterised the last three or four years, towards the hope of healing and generosity and openness to one another.

Hope, though, is not the same as optimism or wishful thinking. Politicians might try to persuade us to be optimistic by coining slogans. They may even lull us into wishing ourselves into a golden era. But hope is different. Hope is the product of a spiritual encounter. Hope is the revelation – the epiphany moment that reveals – that spiritual values of dignity and interconnectedness, and of dependence on God's grace are more important, and more valuable, than economics

or party politics. And that encounter and revelation create in us a commitment to align our lives with God, and through God to serve one another, no matter what the cost.

As we turn from the crib to the cross this Candlemas, what we contemplate is 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 . . . and shared.

Amen