

Sermon

Sunday 31 January 2021  
Candlemas

Lesson

St Luke 2: 22 – 40

2 February is the Feast of Candlemas. From the beginning of the fourth century, churches across the world have celebrated Candlemas: the arrival of the holy family in the temple. Mary, Joseph and their newborn son Jesus were welcomed by the aged priest Simeon and the prophet Anna. Candlemas is forty days after Christmas. In Luxembourg, there are torchlight processions with lighted lanterns; in Mexico, families gather for special meals; and, in Peru, tens of thousands of dancers and musicians take part in native dances. Known as the ‘day of crêpes’, in some traditions candles are lit throughout the home and Christmas decorations finally must be taken down.



Over the centuries, many artists have sought to depict that tender scene in the temple. The contemporary painter, Jan van't Hoff, captures the delight and contentment of Simeon as he holds the

Christ-Child and the sheer joy felt by Anna. In a private moment, Simeon, Anna, Joseph and Mary are blessed with the light of God.

The seventeenth century painter, Jurgen Ovens, portrays Simeon as transfixed by the light of God, overwhelmed by his nearness to Jesus. Amidst the world's



darkness, Simeon found sacred peace. Simeon sang the Nunc

Dimittis:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace  
according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen  
thy salvation....

Simeon sang of his release. He embraced God and God embraced him. The early Church Father, Origen, encouraged Christians: 'Let us too stand in the Temple and hold God's Son and embrace him...'. In a moment's meditation, let yourself be drawn into the scene, into closeness with Christ, and held in the arms of the Divine.

Bible stories are rich in allegory: they are poems and word-pictures with hidden meanings like treasure chests waiting to be opened.

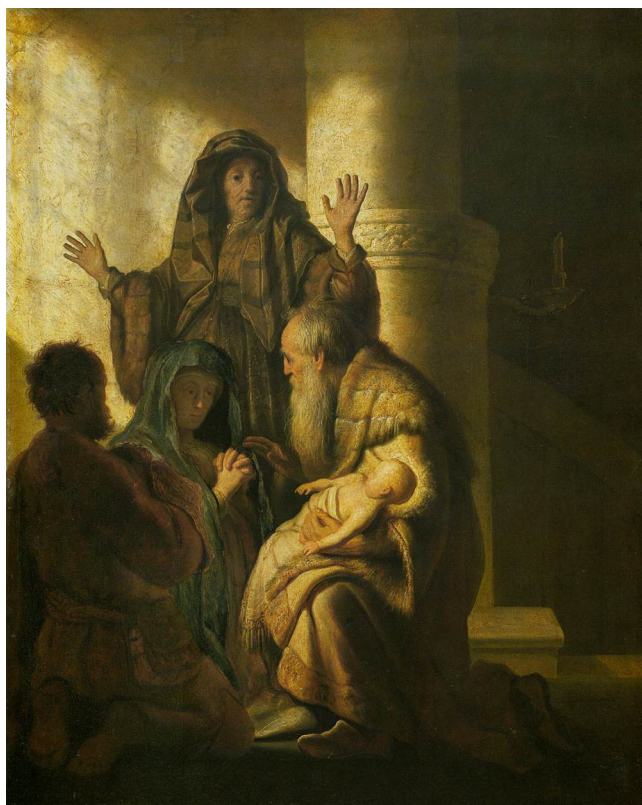
Mary, Joseph and Jesus were met by Simeon and Anna. The daughter of Phanuel, Anna was eighty-four years old; she was married for seven years before her husband died. If for a moment we chew on these details what nourishment will we gain? In Hebrew, the name 'Anna' is Hannah. In the Old Testament, Hannah was a childless woman who, in time, gave birth to a son, Samuel. Samuel or

*Shemu'el* means 'son of God'. Does mention of Anna suggest Jesus as a 'son of God'? Anna was the daughter of Phanuel. Phanuel or Peniel was where Jacob wrestled with God at the river Jabbok. In the darkness, Jacob said he saw God face to face. Does mention of Phanuel suggest that, as he gazed upon the Christ-Child, Simeon has seen the face of God? The numbers, eighty-four and seven, are not without significance. Eighty-four is twelve times seven: twelve is the totality of the Hebrew people (the twelve tribes) and seven represents divine completion (God rested on the seventh day). Does mention of these numbers suggest a sense of fulfilment and completion?

And what of the name 'Simeon' or *Shimon*? In Hebrew, the name means, '[God] has heard my suffering'. For a lifetime, perhaps, Simeon had prayed to God, waited with disciplined patience, for a moment of true encounter with the Eternal. Is not the entire biblical narrative, from Moses at the burning bush to Jesus on the cross, an epic drama to say that God, the Mystery of Life, hears our suffering? In meditation, if we take ourselves into the ethereal quietness of the

temple precincts, if for a moment we stand there, may not we gaze, albeit imperfectly, on the face of God? We move on the fringes of eternity and are sometimes granted vistas.

In his work, *Simeon's Prophecy to Mary*, the Dutch painter,



Rembrandt, pictures the moment when Simeon told Mary that with the suffering of her son a sword would pierce her own soul. The painting is bordered by darkness, except for the light streaming through the window. Spiritually, this is the light of God that enters

the darkness of our own lives. Rembrandt's life was marked by tragedy. Two of his daughters died at the ages of two and three weeks old; his wife, Saskia, died nine years to the day after they married; and, the year before Rembrandt died his beloved son, Titus, died. What did his painting of the holy family bringing their new-

born son to the temple, to Simeon and Anna, mean for Rembrandt?

Was the light of God in the painting something he felt in his own life?

In the face of Mary, did he see his late wife, Saskia? In the baby

Jesus, did he see his own children?

The name Simeon means '[God] hears my suffering'. In his meditation, with each stroke of the brush, did the painter see and feel salvation, the healing of God? Anna is most prominent with her arms raised as if in praise of the 'son of God'. She gazes upon the face of Jesus. Like Jacob at the river Jabbok, she looks on the face of God.

There are many hardships that each of us face over the course of our lives. Sometimes these hardships have come through our own mistakes or misjudgements and sometimes they have come as a result of a turn of events over which we have had no control. The Feast of Candlemas, of processions, crêpes, dances, paintings, and candles lit throughout a home, helps us receive the light of God, of the Eternal, in our own lives. Amen.