

Handing over the light of faith

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The Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Lk 2.22-40

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple. ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? The Lord that Simeon and Anna were waiting for sounds frightening. Who'd have thought it would just be a baby; a child that humble parents brought to present to God in the Temple?

Candlemas, forty days after the Church celebrates Christmas, is when we hear Luke remind us of two Jewish customs. First, for forty days after a Hebrew woman gave birth to a boy, she was viewed as being ritually unclean. After that time, Jewish Law ^(Lev 12) required her to present an offering for her purification.

The other custom looked back to the Hebrews' escape from Egypt. In Exodus 13, it says that all the firstborn of the Hebrews were to be especially dedicated to God. But as 'ordained' service came to be something only tribe of Levi did, the law was relaxed so parents of other tribes could 'redeem' their children. They went to the Temple to make an offering which ritually bought back their firstborn from God.

So today, Luke shows the Holy Family coming to the temple for purification and for a type of ritual hand-over. And it's this theme of hand-over that I want us to think about this morning. It becomes very poignant in our story as two very old people, Simeon and Anna come on stage. They came for a hand-over of their own.

Simeon and the prophet Anna had lived very long lives of

faithful service to God. As prophets do, they sensed what God was doing. God was handing over the Glory that had dwelt in the temple, and entrusting it to a six-week old baby; Jesus, who would shine with that glory for all the world to see.

For Simeon and for Anna, this was at once a moment of exultation and of release. They could let go; they could die in peace; somebody else could carry the load now. The Song of Simeon's is called *the night-prayer of his life* and remains the Church's night-prayer of handing over to God the troubles of each day. So we sang the evening hymn – *Hail gladdening light* – to herald the Gospel today. We also recite the Song of Simeon at the end funerals, over the graves of our loved ones. It's a song of loving hope.

Our own church embodies everything we read in this story. We have faithful seers and servants who have been holding on to faith here for a very long time. You have received the faith from your forebears, and by God's grace, have borne the light aloft in the Church for many years. The younger ones who now share the burden with you faithful mothers and fathers of our church must hold the light aloft in a different world. Today, they pray Simeon's song together with you. We all make it a prayer for ourselves – a thanksgiving for God's fulfilled promises to us, and a prayer which asks that when we hand over the light of faith to those who come after us, we might hand it over to people who've been enabled to hold it; people enabled, by God's grace, to hold aloft the light of faith in a world where deep shadows still threaten. This is our Candlemas prayer. Amen