

## Homily for The Presentation of The Lord (Candlemas) 2020

In 1994 there was an earthquake that knocked out, in the middle of the night, all the power in Los Angeles. People looked out of their homes into the eerie darkness. A number of them called 911 to report a strange cloud hanging over the city. That cloud was the Milky Way, which they had never seen before. 80% of Americans, and 30% of the population of the world, cannot see the Milky Way because of light pollution. This doesn't have much to do with the Presentation in itself, but it does make us think a bit about light and dark. We take light for granted, and even living in the countryside few of us see total darkness if we look out of the window. But when Jesus was born artificial light was intermittent and only for the homes of the well-off. The people who first heard this story knew what total darkness meant: a darkness that was broken only by the light of the moon or the stars, and which on a cloudy night, or inside a building, would be total.

Darkness is something that we fear on a very deep level. We fear it because enemies might be lurking there unseen; or because we might stumble and fall; or because we cannot see where we are going and we might get lost. Darkness encloses us in a frightening world where we control nothing beyond the reach of our arms. Two thousand years ago darkness could not be tamed. So when we read stories about light and darkness we must make that mental adjustment that will allow us to see the enormity of what we are speaking about. The prophet Malachi predicts that the day will come when, suddenly, the Lord will enter the Temple and fill it with his glory. For those who had eyes to see, this is what happens in today's Gospel story. For Simeon and Anna, both of them people whose souls are finely tuned to the deeper realities, find the Temple in Jerusalem flooded with a light so bright that it is almost unbearable. If we had had a procession from outside, as we walked into the church with our candles the light would have grown gradually brighter and stronger, so that the Church would have been flooded with a new light, almost as the Temple in Jerusalem was. And as the procession takes place and the Song of Simeon is sung the refrain comes back again and again '*Lumen ad revelationem gentium...*' Light, light, light. After each verse it comes back – the cantor sings the song but we keep interrupting him 'yes, yes, but light, it's the light, the light is the thing.....'

In this story Jesus is carried by his mother and Joseph, carried to the Temple, on the face of it to be presented there to God, but in reality to take possession of it, as Malachi predicted, and flood it with light. Mary and Joseph carry the light in their hands, just as we have carried our candles today. Even the darkest corners of the Temple will be lit up today.

Knowing that we are frightened of the dark, God offers us his Son to enlighten us. Now we will be surrounded with light, we will be able to see clearly and we will no longer be prisoners of darkness. But, strangely, we sometimes find the light almost as scary as the dark. We can see that there are no enemies lying in wait

for us, of course, and that is good, but we can also see in that bright light that sometimes we are, ourselves the enemy, and that we are instruments of our own downfall. We can see more clearly the right way and the wrong one, but that removes from us the excuse that we have only accidentally got a bit lost and gone the wrong way. We fear the dark, but we also fear what the light might reveal about ourselves.

This feast, in which we surround each other with light, and see each other not just in the light of our own candle, but also in the light of one another's, invites us to do two things. It challenges us to fall in love with the light; to long to discover the truth, the truth about ourselves, about who we are, and about who we might become. In the light that is shed on us by God we can see who we are, good and bad together, but we can also see who we can turn into. Those candles, that cry of '*Lumen..*' invites us to fall in love with the light, with the chance to discover the truth about ourselves, for good or ill, and then to pursue all that makes us beautiful, all that is enhanced and elevated by the light. And the second thing that it invites us to do is, having fallen in love with the light, so that we can learn who we are and who we might become, to become heralds of the light. Having seen what the candles reveal, what they show us about who and what we are, we are challenged to take up those candles and head off into the world outside.

It is a lovely liturgy, this Candlemas Day. It doesn't just show us something, it invites us to be a part of it: part of the Lord's sudden arrival at his Temple, part of the flooding of the Temple with light. Do you dare to fall in love with the light, with the truth of who you are? Do you have the courage to be an apostle, a herald, a messenger of light, to invite others to fall in love with the light, too?