

27 January 2018

Candlemas

It's January, that gloomy month, it's on-and-off cold, grey, drizzly, colds and flu are rife, the days are short, Christmas festivities are past. I often feel gloomy in January but yesterday I felt gloomy at a different level, spiritual gloom. I am feeling the darkness; I keep reading about how awful people can be. Those faces of convicted criminals in the Cambridge News: thieves, rapists, men of violence, murderers. Then we hear about what goes on at fundraising dinners and in film directors' cabins, how young people are sucked so prematurely into a world of drunkenness, drugs and sexual experimentation. The world sometimes seems so dark.

And then there are little flashes of light, beams of grace and goodness that are a relief and a hope. I've been reflecting on the death of two footballers in the past fortnight who seemed to breathe a different sort of air from many of their peers. Cyrille Regis, one of the first black players to break into top-flight football, who endured the racist abuse of opposing fans week after week. One obituary said that he was regarded by black colleagues as "our Martin Luther-King", and urged them not to show anger or fear, but to "smile, keep playing, and scoring goals and they will come round". Eventually, it commented, 'they did'. The light shines in the darkness.

And then there was Jimmy Armfield, England captain before the 1966 World Cup. I have heard him for years on the radio as a summariser in the commentary box. I always thought he had a decency about him that set him apart. I didn't know until his death that he was an active Christian, organist and treasurer at his parish church, and a Lay Canon of Blackburn Cathedral.

Cyrille Regis too was a committed Christian. He had come to faith in Christ through attending a Methodist Church following the death of his best friend and the breakdown of his marriage. He went on to be a popular Christian speaker through Christians in Sport and was also a mentor for many young players – black, Asian and white. The light shines in the darkness.

That's one reason parents bring their children for baptism. When they witness the birth of their child they are overwhelmed with the innocence of a babe and their vulnerability in a world that has plenty to sully that innocence. They want to keep that child in the light and to give them a light that will be both a reassuring presence for them and a guide to show them the way.

Perhaps that was part of the experience of Mary and Joseph too as they brought their new born son to the Temple for a traditional ceremony that has some parallels with the baptism of an infant today. It says they 'brought Jesus to the Temple to present him to the Lord.' That 'present' word in Greek is the same one that Paul uses in Romans 12.1 when he urges his readers 'to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship'. The word has a technical meaning within sacrifice. It is the offering up, offering back to God of a gift bestowed on us in creation, and here in procreation, which in turn we offer back to God in gratitude so that our offering may be sanctified, made holy. Two weeks ago we heard the story of the Samuel's call in the Temple. Samuel you may remember was an answer to the barren Hannah's prayer and in gratitude she presented him back to the Lord to serve in his temple.

So Mary and Joseph are making a sacrifice, offering back their first born son to God. Sacrifice literally means to make holy; only secondarily does it mean to give up. Some sacrifices were given up and they became the property of the priests, but many were received back; presented by the worshipper, offered up by the priest, thereby made holy and then handed back to the worshipper – if it was food, to be consumed, if it was a child to be loved and cherished and brought up to know the Lord to whom he was consecrated. Hannah sacrificed her son and also gave him up, handed him over to be educated and to serve in the Temple. Mary and Joseph sacrificed their son and then received him back so that with their guidance he may grow up, as it says, become strong and be filled with wisdom. The sacrifice in the second sense happens of course at the end of the gospel

when Jesus is handed over to be condemned and crucified and he gives his life for the world, for us. Mary in her heart has to hand him over again, and he dies and is buried, but then again she receives him back, risen, having conquered sin and death.

And parents bringing children to baptism today present them, hand them over and in baptism they are dead and buried with Christ before coming through the waters of death and rising to new life. And in their baptism they are made holy – sacrificed, or, if you prefer, consecrated.

In Jesus's Presentation and in the baptism of children today the parents are involved. It is their decision and primarily their responsibility. But in every baptism here you, as members of this Christian community, are involved. You are the Simeons and Annas of this church – or you can be. Jeanne and Lesley are because they have given time to be trained as baptism authorised lay ministers and they are working with us in the clergy term as we seek to make the experience of baptism here as meaningful and important for children and parents as we possibly can. And Ursula has been an Anna too as she kindly made the posy that was given to Martha when she was welcomed after her baptism last week. Because you know I don't know which priest was on duty that day in the Temple when they brought Jesus but neither his name nor his part in the proceedings is recorded and that, I suspect, is because the parents didn't much notice or remember. It was that prayerful presence with them in the temple that was remembered and whose words and actions were deeply treasured. Two elderly members of the temple congregation were the most important. It's a reminder that the presence and contribution of you who are older is every bit as important as what those who have greater energy and firmer knees. Being a genuinely all-age community is one of the great strengths and attractions of this church. We are all involved. We are all family. So may I urge you – whether you are older, but also you who are younger – to see our ministry of baptism for infants and children as not something just for the vicar or curate and one or two helpers. It is our ministry. We often have christenings outside the main service but all of them are invited back to be welcomed by the whole congregation and one of the things we are really committed to is making that welcome more than just a brief encounter. We want it to be something as memorable as Jesus and his parents experienced in the Temple that day.

So I've spoken of the involvement of the parents and of the wider community of faith. But it's easy in all this to see the child him or herself as just a passive presence in the whole thing, one who is, awake or asleep, calm or wailing, having something done to them of which they are only dimly if at all aware.

But something extraordinary, wonderful and awesome is going on for them. They may be oblivious to it; their parents, well-meaning though they may be, may also be oblivious to it. But that child is being placed at the threshold of eternity, that child is being given the greatest gift they will ever receive. For many it will be a passing moment, a brief encounter that doesn't seem to make any difference in their lives and their relationship to God. But for some it will be the beginning of a thread of grace that will run through their lives, often invisibly but sometimes with great visibility, a thread that like Samuel in the Temple has moments of calling, of hearing a voice, without having a clue where the voice is coming from or what to do about it, but that led to a later very conscious knowing the Lord and bringing his word to his people.

I was sharing a few weeks ago about my baptism. The vicar was Jim Lennox, the man who married my parents in Huddersfield and became a family friend but who never enticed any of them into his church. I was never taken to church by my parents and I think my call to faith, even my call to ordination, began before I ever thought that going to church was part of the deal. I was ordained deacon in St Paul's Cathedral in 1987. Jim, I am glad to say was there, and presented me with his own green stole, which I still use from time to time. It reminds me of the thread of grace beginning with my baptism and that has continued sustained by the faithful prayers of Jim and others down the years. It began when I knew little about and had little say in what was going on. But God's grace

is so much bigger and richer than our little uncertainties and mixed motivations. What my not conspicuously devout parents thought they were doing, what my Auntie Florrie and Auntie Blanche and Uncle George thought they were doing is now known only to God. But Jim I think knew what he was doing – and, much more importantly, God knew what he was doing and that, my dear friends, seems to be why I'm here, and why I do what Jim did to me and pray that God will be calling even one to some conscious service for him - as he did me.