Sunday 1st February 2026

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Hymn 80, verses 1-6 and 13 When candles are lighted on Candlemas Day

Hymn 300 Glory in the highest

The Collect

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty, whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple in the substance of our flesh: grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts, by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Malachi 3:1-5 The Coming Messenger

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Canticle The Song of Christ's Glory

1 Christ Jesus was in the form of God,
but he did not cling to equality with God.
2 He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,
and was born in our human likeness.
3 Being found in human form he humbled himself,
and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
4 Therefore God has highly exalted him,
and bestowed on him the name above every name,
5 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth;
6 And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Luke 2:22-40 Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and

when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." There was also a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.

The Sermon

Two gentlemen have kindly agreed to begin this sermon by reading a free version of the Nunc dimittis - the Song of Simeon - which we have just heard as part of the Gospel reading. Please listen carefully, because every word counts.

Let me off the hook, Lord.
You promised you would;
You've done it.
Everyone wants peace,
And so do I!

He is the light,
But glory for Israel
Isn't as simple as it sounds.
A Jew who'll free everyone
From fear of the dark? No fear!

I don't need to see the end.
I know the end. It is a continuum.
No stable cabined him;
no temple cribs him;
no tomb shall confine him.

You are the end.
And this is the beginning:
Everyone will see.
Glory be.
Go free!

Candlemas is a curious, ambiguous feast, and it's certainly more than just an excuse for lighting some extra candles. That ambiguity is reflected in the 1662 Prayer Book, where it has two names: The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, commonly called The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin. It's ambiguous in another sense too. This is part of the Christmas story – Jesus is just a six-week-old baby. So the extra candles we light carry a reminder of his birth into the midwinter darkness of the world. But the Gospel text points forward as well, as Simeon prophesies falling and rising, and the sword-thrust through Mary's soul: suffering, death, and beyond that the as-yet unknown light of a glittering morn.

So it took me quite a while, certainly much longer than usual to figure out what to say in this sermon. How is a clear message to be constructed and delivered against so ambiguous a background? What theological point is Luke making by including this passage in his gospel? How is our discipleship strengthened by what we have just heard? What, in a word, is the Good News here?

Briefly, the theology is about Jesus, Joseph and Mary. By presenting Jesus in the temple and making the offering required by the Law, Joseph and Mary are shown to be righteous, true people of Israel, God's chosen. Every first-born-male shall be offered to the Lord, and his life sacrificially redeemed by the substitution of the life of animals or birds. Luke includes this whole episode to remind us that we are in profound water here, as the Redeemer is redeemed by sacrifice in order to become the sacrifice. The paradoxical theology is worth pondering.

The discipleship, on the other hand, is about Simeon and Anna, and the focus lies in the words of Simeon's song, usually known by its Latin opening words, "Nunc dimittis." We heard it as part of the Gospel reading; we heard it in a very free paraphrase at the start of this sermon; we shall sing it in

another form, as the hymn with which we end this service, “Faithful vigil ended.” It can be justifiably described as the essential text of the feast. It also explains “Candlemas” - a light to lighten the Gentiles.

We are not told how old Simeon is, but the implication of his own words is that he is pretty old. Anna is eighty-four. Both, I guess, would have known the words of Psalm 90: “The years of our age are three score years and ten, or if we have strength, fourscore.” Not much left to look forward to, so let’s live in the past. But from the same psalm: “for a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday passing, and like one watch in the night.” In God’s eyes they are mere youngsters, with everything to look forward to: the new thing that God has in store, in which all their hopes will be realized. All they have to lose is fear. No fear!

In fact, of course, you can’t really describe Anna and Simeon in any real sense as disciples of Jesus. They have more in common, really, with the wise men and John the Baptist as waymarks. Led by the Spirit, they recognized and acknowledged something about to unfold, and knew that God was at work. If they could be free from the fear of letting go of all that had shaped their earlier lives, how much more can we who are indeed the followers welcome the surprise of God’s tomorrow – even here in Hexhamshire! As the saying goes: Let go, and let God.

Fulfilment: Lord now you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled. At Candlemas we look forward, not only to Easter but beyond, to Pentecostal Good News: There’s a Spirit in the air, telling Christians everywhere: Praise the love that Christ revealed, living, working in our world. May his Spirit fill our praise, guide our thoughts and change our ways. God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow’s life today!

For our prayers

We pray with all who are sick, for their healing in accordance with God’s will, remembering Prue and Nancy, Christina Baldwin, Nigel Baty-Symes, Stuart Bell, Maggie Bennett, Daniel Bosman, Brenda Clark, Graeme Common, Nick Cook, Suzie Dent, Lorraine Dodd, Sue Hanning, Kathleen Lee, Heather Loughead, Andrew McKendrick, Carol McKendrick, Kate Marris, Ned Ryan, Will Sadler, Elizabeth Sambell, Maureen Stevens and Elizabeth Wood.

We give thanks for the grace of God in the lives of Freddie Wilson, Ralph Curry, Alan Simpson, Alison Tweddle, Gillian Nixon and Margret Huddleston, whose year’s mind is about this time.

Hymn 198 There’s a spirit in the air

The Prayer after Communion

Lord, you fulfilled the hope of Simeon and Anna, who lived to welcome the Messiah: may we, who have received these gifts beyond words, prepare to meet Christ Jesus when he comes to bring us to eternal life; for he is alive and reigns now and for ever.

Hymn 360 Faithful vigil ended

For the week ahead

Concerning energy in prayer

We belong to an active race with a great sense of responsibility, and, ever since the Reformation, we have had drilled into us the necessity of doing our part in religion, until it has often overshadowed God's part. Thus it happens that for many earnest men and women religion has become a strain; their prayer has been offered with a background of duty and a fear of inadequate effort, which has done much to destroy its freedom and spontaneity. There is to be found a corrective for this in the thought of the origin of prayer. When we realise that the stream of divine love is forever carrying us and our desires into God, we are able, by joining it, to relax the tension of our effort. I am only too sadly aware of the dangers of sloth in prayer, but I do not think those dangers will be real when a conscious effort has been made to enter the current of God's love.

From *To Jerusalem* by R. Somerset Ward

Next Sunday: 8th February 2026 **Second Sunday before Lent**

Bible readings
Romans 8:18-25
St Paul gives his readers advice about patience, hope and salvation.
Matthew 6:25-34
Using illustrations from nature, Jesus tells his followers not to worry about the future.

Ash Wednesday: 18th February

To mark the beginning of Lent there will be a service of hymns, readings and prayers in St Helen's at 6.00 p.m. with music led by St Mary's Choir and their director and organist, Paul Berry.

Lent

As in past years there will be an opportunity to take part in a study/discussion/reflection group meeting each week during Lent. We will be looking at events in the Old Testament which have links, echoes and resonances in the story of Jesus. Details of venue and meeting time will be announced in due course.