

## Candlemass

Rt Revd Andrew Watson

*Luke 2:22-40, The Bourne, February 2025*

Friends, it's a joy to be here at St. Thomas' for this Candlemass celebration, and many thanks to Sandy for inviting me... And as we turn to our scriptures together, may I speak in the name of...

It's the story-line in many of our best loved children's books: small people, insignificant people in this world, called to be big people, people with a destiny, in another one. Whether it's four child evacuees discovering they are kings and queens in the land of Narnia; whether it's a destitute child called to inherit the magical world of Willy Wonka; whether it's an abused orphan discovering he is great in the kingdom of Hogwarts; there is something about this storyline that captures the youthful imagination like no other, and continues to resonate long after we've put childish ways behind us. It moves us. It speaks to our souls.

Intriguingly it's not something as superficial as fame, success or money that lies at the heart of it. We never sense that the Pevensie children crave the fortune that awaits them beyond the wardrobe, or that Charlie is auditioning for *Britain's Got Talent*. No, it's something deeper and more courageous than that: a longing for significance, perhaps, and fellowship too; an awakening to the idea that our lives can make a difference beyond the more self-centered dreams to which we also – perhaps increasingly - aspire.

And the Festival of Candlemass brings to a close the Christian season of Epiphany, just 40 days after we were eating our turkey or nutroast and opening our stockings. And the word Epiphany means a lightbulb moment: a flash of revelation, after which our lives are never quite the same again. The Pevensie wardrobe, Charlie's golden ticket, and the letter personally addressed to

*Mr H Potter  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
4 Privet Drive,  
Little Whinging,  
Surrey.'*

all depict personal epiphanies, turning the ordinariness of the children's lives into something adventurous and purposeful - so that a natural question arises: might the power of these fictional stories be pointing us to a deeper spiritual reality, to something rooted in profound and maybe widespread human experience?

It's a question that leads us naturally into our gospel reading for this evening, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple: just the latest in the line of *Luke's* epiphanies in the first two chapters of his gospel. Because the moment Luke has finished his account of shepherds watching their flocks by night and choirs of angels singing in exultation – an epiphany on the scale of the grandest of grand operas - he leads us down a quieter, simpler track, as we travel with the Holy Family the few miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, where they plan to fulfil their obligations under the Law of Moses.

There are five people in this story: one a baby, just 6 weeks old; another his mother, a young adult; the third her husband, rather older by tradition; and finally a couple of religious veterans, Simeon and Anna, real pillars of the Temple community - the latter of whom has reached the grand old age of 84. And this is an epiphany story, true, but it's more than that. Because epiphanies in Luke's Gospel invariably draw together three elements: revelation, yes, but equally vocation and worship. It's when we see Jesus for who he is, in Luke's world, that our lives take on new significance and purpose - an experience that is so powerful, so joyous, that it leads us into heartfelt praise, into 'singing to the Lord a new song'.

We think of the priest Zechariah at the beginning of the Gospel, whose Epiphany in the Jerusalem Temple announced his calling to father John the Baptist no less, and who opened his mouth to proclaim, *'Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free'* - the so-called Benedictus.

We think of his wife Elizabeth, still coming to terms with her own unexpected calling to be John's mother, whose Epiphany (as cousin Mary knocked at the door) led to words picked up in the so-called Ave Maria: *'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb...'*

We think of Mary herself, for whom Elizabeth's words brought welcome relief following *her* troubling Epiphany in the presence of the Angel Gabriel: *'My soul magnifies the Lord'*, she sang - Magnificat - *'and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'*.

Or we think of the angels, who themselves would join in the worship: *'Hail Mary full of grace'*, as Gabriel had put it. *'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth'*, in the words of the *Bethlehem* angels.

And that leaves **Simeon** and **Anna** in Luke's account of the story: Simeon recognising in a flash that the infant in his arms was none other than the Messiah 'come to his Temple', as the prophet Malachi had predicted, and singing *Nunc Dimittis* in response - 'Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation'. Anna, having an Epiphany of her own, as she too encountered the holy child, and responded with words of praise and prophetic testimony.

Simeon continued with reference to the prophets, as he recognised that this little child was none other than Isaiah's *'light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel'* - so giving us the first inkling that here was a moment of global and not just nationalistic significance. There was something ominous too about his words to Mary, which equally cast the shadow of the cross over this intimate scene. And with that, Luke brought to an end this cycle of epiphanies and callings and canticles in his magnificent account of Jesus' conception and birth.

Angels and humans, men and women, young and old, ordained and lay, marrieds and singles had all been drawn into the purposes of the living God in these epiphanies, and so contributed to that cycle: a foretaste of the Day of Pentecost, where the Spirit would be poured out on 'all flesh', regardless of age, gender, nationality or social standing.

But why bring together Epiphany, calling and worship in the first place?

It's partly because Luke was recording what he'd heard from others. It's partly too that he knew his Old Testament, where singing (and indeed dancing) were regular responses to a fresh revelation of God and His purposes. But it's also because there is nothing more liable to open our lips to show forth God's praise – than to receive an Epiphany of our own, and a fresh sense of that small but unique role that each of us is being called to fulfil God's plan for the world He loves so much. For some that may be a dramatic experience, for others, something far more gentle. A gradual dawning of the day – a growing sense of God's reality and call upon our lives – is as fully authentic an epiphany as the brightest of lights on the Damascus Road.

I've been a bishop in Birmingham, then in Surrey, for more than sixteen years – and over that time I've been privileged to sit down with maybe four thousand confirmation candidates, and many hundreds of ordinands and clergy too, and to hear of their Epiphany moments – including some of yours over the years.

And we can't manufacture epiphanies of course. They don't come on demand. Ultimately it's up to God alone when and how and to whom He chooses to reveal Himself. But in the famous phrase of Brother Lawrence, echoing down the centuries from his monastery kitchen in 17<sup>th</sup> century Paris, we can 'practise the presence of God', quietly praying through each day that we might recognise Him in and around us. Or, as Jesus put it, we can ask and seek and knock, in full assurance of a divine response, however unexpected that might sometimes be.

For Simeon's 'light to lighten the Gentiles' is still burning today. The candle of Candlemas is still aflame. And particularly at a time when the news is challenging at best, and it's easy to become downhearted and demoralised - how important to open ourselves afresh to that candlelight, so that in the midst of all else, we might know the presence of God and respond in heartfelt praise.

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There is one final canticle hidden in the early chapters of Luke – the simplest and profoundest of them all. We've heard the songs of angels and humans, men and women, young and old, ordained and lay, married and single. We've had our Benedictus and Ave Maria, our Gloria, our Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. But this final song is sung by God Himself at that pivotal Epiphany moment when Jesus was immersed in the waters of baptism and the Spirit alighted on him like a dove. For here are words of poetry not prose, the words of a father singing over his child: *'You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased'*.

'You are my Child, the Beloved'. Those are God's words too to every Christian believer, as the recipients of what St. Paul described as 'God's glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'. For the followers of Christ are children of the King of Kings, princes and princesses in His Kingdom. They are heirs to all that He has prepared for them both now and into all eternity. They are those who live out the deep reality to which those evocative children's books all point. And we are called to be among them. In the word of the American poet Raymond Carver, written shortly before his death,

*And did you get what*

*you wanted from this life, even so?*

*I did.*

*And what did you want?*

*To call myself beloved, to feel myself*

*beloved on the earth.*

And so may the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, bestow His glorious grace on you in the Beloved, now and into all eternity. Amen.