

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Candlemas

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All Saints' Marseille

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If you want a joyful, colourful and flavourful Candlemas festival: come to Marseille! Candlemas is, indeed, celebrated in style in this city. No less than eight days of celebrations, with processions, renewal of vows, special candles and biscuits that are blessed and shared, and much more.

The people who will start gathering in the small hours, on Thursday, to pray, and sing, and walk together, are faithful to a long tradition that goes back to the beginning of the 5th century. The one who started it was John Cassian, born in what is now Romania. Cassian was also the one who first established monastic life in the middle of Marseille and whose writings inspired Saint Benedict, founder of Western monasticism and today one of the patron saints of Europe.

Having witnessed in Bethlehem and Egypt the great feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, unknown at that time in Europe, Cassian introduced it to Marseille, even before it was instituted for the whole Western Church by Pope Gelasius at the end of the 5th century. A beautiful encounter between East and West in Marseille. This is heritage that can bear fruit even today.

The true meaning of Candlemas is to be found in its dual nature. There is rejoicing for the revelation of the Christ Child in the Temple, greeted by Simeon and Anna. At the same time, the prophetic words of Simeon, who speaks of the falling and rising of many and of the sword that will pierce Mary's heart, lead on to Christ's Passion. They warn that the journey of the disciples, like that of their Master, is the way of the cross.

The Eastern Churches call Candlemas the "Feast of the Encounter": for on this day, we hear, in the words of Luke, about the encounter between the Lord who

is coming and the people who are waiting for him, represented by Simeon and Anna. The gift of God encounters the hope of humankind. Simeon and Anna sum up the long line of generations of those who seek God, of those who long for him. They are bearers of all the expectations Israel had since the promise God made to Abraham: “in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed”. A promise which God has made to offer to all humankind his love and salvation.

Simeon and Anna’s lives had been infused with the hope that the Messiah would bring radical newness to the world. And now that their eyes had been opened, they saw in Mary’s child born in poverty what was still hidden from the eyes of the world: “The Lord whom you seek has suddenly come to his temple.” And thus, God has kept his promise to Israel; in the words of the psalmist, “the King of Glory has come in” and so redemption is at hand.

There is much gladness in Simeon and Anna’s encounter with the Christ Child and their faithful hoping and waiting are transformed. These marathon runners of prayer and holiness can be fearless in speaking about Christ’s presence among them. In this moment of recognition and thanksgiving, Simeon’s response is to praise God in the beautiful words of the Nunc Dimittis, the canticle many Christians say every evening at the office of Compline: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.” Simeon understands that what God will do through this child is a universal offer.

In this scene of intimacy and awe in the temple, we can find the common thread of every human life: God comes to meet us. God’s primary and characteristic gesture towards humankind is to come to meet us. We are all here this morning because, one day, we welcomed God who asked - delicately, patiently - to be let into our lives. In the Temple, an encounter happened in the simplicity of a dialogue, an exchange of glances, a respectful gesture, perhaps a smile. Likewise, there is nothing formal or spectacular when God comes to meet us, no fanfare or hosts of angels who sing the Gloria, no fireworks or unusual star in the sky to be observed and followed, no *deus ex machina* moment. The invitation to an encounter is so subtle, that it might go unnoticed. Will we allow ourselves to be surprised by the God who wants to engage with us in a conversation marked by simplicity and familiarity?

The expanse of the paths God takes to meet us is most astonishing: each time different, each time adapted to each person. He sends the Spirit to draw us out

of slumber, of habits, of discouragement, of comfortable tranquillity; to secretly lead us towards him, because, like Simeon and Anna, we thirst for him, even if we can't name this longing.

The encounter with God does not happen in an instant. It is a long journey. Simeon and Anna have spent long prayerful years growing in faith and awareness. They have learnt attentiveness to God - so deeply, that when the moment comes, they can be open to the prompting of the Spirit. God is patient. He gives us time - a lifetime - to prepare ourselves to encounter him.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber recognised that we get prepared to encounter God through our everyday encounters with other human beings and with the world. He said, "Meet the world with the fullness of your being and you shall meet God." Since God came to visit his people, to experience life with us in the radical simplicity of a human existence, all our human relationships can become visitations, God's breaking into our lives with light and blessing. We should learn such attentiveness to our human encounters, that we could hear God speaking to us through them.

Today, the joy and peace of God, which have been announced at Christmas, are confirmed by Simeon to be a gift to every human being. We need to celebrate this light that breaks in even today, in the midst of the darkness of the world. As Christians, we are charged, like Simeon and Anne, to watch over the hope of all humanity. Therefore, we come, on the feast of Candlemas, to catch a glimpse of this light so we can tell others what we have seen, and witness, through our lives, to our encounter with God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

May the light we'll hold in our hands at the end of the service prompt us to allow ourselves to become a light for others and may God give us the grace of the Encounter, so that all our encounters become paths towards his Light.

Amen.