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WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Sermon – The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Candlemas
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When the days grow short and the cold settles in, our bodies and hearts long for light. In the northern parts of our continent, people spend the night outside with the hope of catching a glimpse of the northern lights. Candles appear on windowsills and tables. Christmas decorations linger longer than usual, as though we are reluctant to let the light go.

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I noticed something quietly beautiful. In every service I attended, light was shared. A single candle was lit, and from that flame others were kindled, until the light spread through the whole congregation. Flames that were fragile, and yet steady.

And so we come today to this feast of the Candlemas, a feast of light, that meets us in the heart of winter, when we know, in our bones as well as in our prayers, how much light matters.

The blessing of candles, where it is still practised, reminds us that their light is not manufactured by force or mastery. It is received, then shaped, and finally tended with care. And yet these small flames point beyond themselves. They are signs of another light — one that stands

above nature's light — Christ, the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world.

Candlemas acknowledges that there are moments in our lives when our senses awaken, when our ordinary seeing opens onto a greater reality — a deeper, fuller life. Moments when seeing becomes recognition, and recognition becomes acknowledgment. Moments when divinity and humanity touch, when heaven and earth are joined.

So it was for Simeon and Anna. In a child brought to the Temple, Simeon saw the fulfilment of God's promise, the light of God's glory. He saw freedom enough to let go in peace. In that small, fragile life, he saw the fullness of his own and was given a vision of hope for the world. A hope that brings peace — the peace of being held in the hands of God, even in the darkest times. And so Simeon dares to say bold words: "My eyes have seen your salvation." Not *will see*. Not *understand fully*. But *have seen*.

And yet Scripture does not pretend that the darkness has vanished. The prophet Isaiah, whose words we hear in this season, reminds us that "night still covers the earth, and darkness the peoples." It can be hard, at times, not to despair at that darkness.

Candlemas is here to remind us that, as poet Malcolm Guite writes: *Against the dark our Saviour's face is bright*[1].

Light not as the absence of darkness, but its quiet contradiction.

[1] Malcolm Guite, *Candlemas*

Let's be honest: many of us, after we have lived a while and seen a fair amount, begin to lose our expectancy. Experience can make us wise — but it can also make us tired. We become a little bored and we stop expecting very much. Life, we tell ourselves, is more or less what it is. We find ourselves closed off to wonder, to goodness, even to God. Candlemas is a reminder that Jesus came into the world as a newborn child precisely to reawaken those possibilities in us and in our world.

Simeon and Anna refused that quiet resignation. They remained open for God to do something new. Late in life became, for them, the time when they were most able to see God and to serve God. Candlemas dares to say to us: it is never too late.

But God's work is rarely obvious. It is unlikely that Simeon arrived at the Temple that day expecting the Messiah to be a baby in someone's arms. And perhaps this is why the Fox tells the Little Prince[2] that it is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.

So often God acts in the ordinary and the everyday — through the people and the moments we might easily overlook. So often, God's glory hides itself in what is small enough to be missed. And so attentiveness becomes a spiritual discipline: listening for the Spirit's quiet prompting, learning to look again at what seems familiar. "How many common things are trodden underfoot which, if examined carefully, awaken our astonishment,"[3] exclaimed Augustine of Hippo.

Simeon and Anna embody what Jesuit writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade called "the Sacrament of the Present Moment" — the conviction that

[2] Antoine de Saint-Éxupéry, *The Little Prince*
[3] Augustine, *Letter 137*

God comes to us, again and again, under the signs of what is ordinary and mundane. They consent to the moment that is given.

And so, in an age of instant everything, Candlemas is an invitation to slow down. God's work in the world is usually long and patient. Simeon and Anna waited almost their whole lives to see salvation with their own eyes. Mary herself would wait another thirty years before the promise entrusted to her began to unfold in public. And all the while, in the very obscurity and ordinariness of it, the long, slow work of God was quietly taking place.

And all of this waiting, this attentiveness, this slow work of God, comes into focus in one simple, almost domestic moment: an old man taking a child into his arms. Nothing dramatic. Nothing spectacular. And yet everything is given there.

The ancient liturgy of this feast gives us a startling line: "The old man carried the child, yet the child ruled the old man."[4] Simeon holds God — and yet it is Simeon who is held by the promise. Creator and creature, eternity and time, are held together in a single moment. To hold Christ in our arms, as Simeon did, is already to be upheld by Christ, and to place ourselves under his just and gentle rule. To hold Christ is to entrust our lives to his tiny hands.

In the Orthodox tradition, the one who had waited year after year for the consolation of Israel, is known as Simeon the God-receiver. And who among us does not long, at some deep level, to be a God-receiver? That longing is written into the human heart. Whether we name it clearly or not, it is what draws us here. We want to receive

[4] Antiphone at first vespers for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple

God. We want to see our salvation. We want to know the fulfilment of God's promises in our own lives, and to be set free — as Simeon was — to go in peace.

This possibility is not reserved for Simeon alone. All of us are intended to be God-receivers. The light Simeon sees is not only for himself, but for all people, for you and for me.

And yet Candlemas asks us a searching question. Are we ready to receive God when God comes to us like this? God in a child. God in the small, the lowly, the poor, the vulnerable, the easily overlooked.

What might we need to put down in order to pick up this child? The coming season of Lent gives us time to learn that difficult readiness and freedom.

And so Candlemas sends us out as it finds us: carrying small flames into a darkened world, trusting that the light we longed for has already been placed into our hands — and that what appears slight and ordinary may yet be, for us and for many, the salvation of God.