

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, 2021

This last 12 months has done strange things to our sense of public and private, so does this feast of Candlemas. I'll explain what I'm on about...

Our spare room or sofa has become our office. All sorts of people have been treated to glimpses of drying underpants and household pets behind our left ear... Likewise, our public lives: socialising, culture, work and learning have collapsed between 4 walls and those we live with, or don't.

This pandemic has jumbled our sense of public and private, and it's brought very heavy pressure to bear on both – obliterating the public, and turning our private life into a pressure cooker (whether that be one of emptiness or over-fullness).

Everyone's experience is different, of course, but I wonder if you recognise *something* in my broad brushstrokes?

And so to Candle Mass: the blessing of the candles.

But what has this to do with the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple (the proper name for Candlemas)? Let alone things public and private?

Like every good Jewish baby Jesus is presented to God in the Temple 40 days after birth. And Simeon, the old man who had been waiting on God's promise seizes the child and announces that *He* is 'the *light* to *lighten* the gentiles' – light for the world...hence the blessing of the lights today.

But also an illuminating interplay between public and private. Our Lady, St Joseph and the Lord come into the Temple, full of bustle and chatter and the stink of incense, animal blood and sweat; hundreds of people coming and going. The very antithesis of Covid-compliance... The point is, *hidden* amongst the hubbub this is a private and personal experience, the Holy Family just one of many doing the same. But Simeon, who sees (by God's gift) that Jesus is who *He is*, shatters this privacy and proclaims in the Temple that Jesus is not only the salvation of *Israel*, but of the *whole world*. St Luke tells us they 'marvelled at what was said about him'. I bet they did. And then Anna hoves into view and speaks of the child who would save us from death itself.

Any plans of ‘a nice private baptism followed by light refreshments in a nearby hotel’ are exploded by the circus arriving with 40 piece brass band. Private and public.

Despite many cultures considering it redundant or rude, *privacy* remains a virtue for the English. ‘The Englishman’s home is his castle’. Thanks to Covid, we all seem to have dug moats and installed spikey portcullises to boot.

But today God gives us a very sharp nudge. The light of our candles as we hear the Nunc Dimittis (those iridescent words of St Simeon) at the end of Mass today, is not *private*, but shone for *all the world* to see by. This is our Faith. This tough and bruising year all the more so.

We are fed up and worn down, and so is everyone else. This makes it all the *more* important that we children of light gird our loins and hold up the light, giving it away. The *wondering* Fr Stephen, Gerard Manley Hopkins and our own Elizabeth Barret bid us do last week is exactly the courageous, against-the-odds-openness that St Simeon had as he waited year after year to see the hope that would overcome the world face to face, so that he might die in peace.

No doubt worn out and close to giving up (as any of us would have been) it is precisely because of this that we (like Simeon) must serve a hurting, waiting world by sharing the substance of our hope. A light for the world, for our communities, for our friends, families, school-mates and colleagues.

But what hope?

I hope for theatres to reopen, and pubs, and the frontdoors of family and friends, and borders so I don't run out of cheese and wine and everything else, and hospitals to be safely open for staff and patients, and schools and work places so that people can thrive. We all do!

But we also know that our hope, our *real hope*, is greater even than these. That even when all these things have come (and they will!) it isn't the summit of our hoping. The source of *our* hoping is the little beginning we celebrate today. That beginning was Simeon's ending, it is both our beginning and our ending. A little family, a tiny baby, a private encounter that we and the whole world through us, are being invited to. To walk in a light unquenchable, to share that light of faith with those around us, the light who enlightens the whole world.