

One of the blogs that I read recently made this interesting comment about the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or *Candlemas*.

dear preacher, perhaps you can point to and name the local green shoots of justice and peace already emerging in your neighbourhood, and the clean-up that they demand from us. Oh, yes, and play with candles too!

I don't mind if I do!

Following on from Christmas tradition is the celebration of the 40th day. In the Church, we follow the story of Luke combining two actions of Mary and Joseph into one event before they return to Nazareth.

Firstly, there is the Purification of Mary. Ritually unclean, not to be purified would leave Mary with the stain of Original Sin. On the 40th day, she was able to be purified.

The old Prayer Book had the service known as *The Churching of Women*.

The Woman, at the usual time after her delivery, shall come into the Church decently apparelled, and there shall kneel down in some convenient place, as hath been accustomed, or as the Ordinary shall direct.

Prayers would then be said over the woman, and the following instruction was given:

The Woman, that cometh to give her thanks, must offer accustomed offerings; and, if there be a Communion, it is convenient that she receive the holy Communion.

Over the years, even though the ceremony is based on the Leviticus 12:

² Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean.

³ And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

⁴ And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled.

⁵ But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days.

⁶ And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest:

⁷ Who shall offer it before the LORD, and make an atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood. This is the law for her that hath born a male or a female.

⁸ And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean

A few things of interest in this. Firstly, the penalty for a boy was 40 days; a girl was 80, after all, it would take longer to get over having a girl! Once the allotted time was up, then the purifying

included a ritual bath and the offering of a first year lamb for the burnt offering, and a turtle dove or pigeon for the sin offering. The priest will make atonement for the issue of her blood. If you could not bring or afford a lamb, then it was two turtles or young pigeons to be offered.

For Luke, this is certainly behind the understanding of the offering that Mary and Joseph gave in his account of the Presentation. However, there is, as Luke tries to make sense of what he didn't fully understand, a mixing up of the Redeeming of the first born child and Mary's purification.

Every firstborn of man among your sons, you shall redeem. And it will come to pass that if your son asks you in the future, saying, "What is this?" you shall say to him, "With a mighty hand did God take us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass when Pharaoh was too stubborn to let us out, God slew every firstborn in the land of Egypt."

The redemption price for firstborn non-Levites was set at 5 [shekels](#):

Every thing that opens the womb, of all flesh which they offer to the LORD, both of man and beast, shall be yours; however the first-born of man you shall surely redeem... And their redemption-money--from a month old shalt thou redeem them--shall be, according to your valuation, five shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuaryⁱ

In Luke's account, there is no mention of the paying of the shekels or pieces of silver at all in the ceremony that is called Pidyon HaBen. The understanding of this is important as it actually performs something very significant in the life of Jesus. Luke skips over it slightly when he says "the firstborn is offered to God." Pidyon HaBen is based on the understanding that for all families it is the first born who has a priestly role in the traditions (unless the child is a Levite) and the priestly understanding of being able to atone, set right, forgive and restore were passed on to this child.

It was a redeeming of the first born, and in someways, what we could say is either a consecration or ordination to the role of being the one able to make atonement or sacrifice. This, of course, is highly symbolic and rich in understanding in terms of what the child Jesus was ultimately called to do and be.

And in the midst of this Presentation or Redeeming of the Christ Child for God's purposes, Mary is restored to community having made the appropriate offering of two turtle doves. Given that they were travelling back to their home town of Nazareth, it is understandable that both would be performed as once.

And the playing with candles bit? Well...another interesting thing comes into play, which is certainly not canonical (scriptural) but associated with everyone's favourite banisher of snakes, Patrick.

February 1 gives us the clue as to what is happening! It is the feast of Brigid of Kildare, said to be a contemporary of Patrick, of whom little else is known, but certainly, she is very much venerated in the land of the Emerald Isle. Where the 'hmm' moment comes is the understanding that Brigid's day is actually Imbolc, the pagan feast of the coming of spring, commemorating the halfway point between equinoxes. The pagan goddess of spring or new light was Brid, from which we get "Brigid"

and “Bride”.

In the temple of Brid, the perpetual candles were tended to by priestesses, and carried in possession on this day. Now...how did this little pagan number influence the Church today?

Another tradition from one ancient source was that when Mary was being purified, a young bride carried candles before her in the Temple. Despite the wind and the elements the candle flames did not move but remained upright and steady. Thus...it was important to have candles blessed for the Church year as a result, something that has been happening since at least the 2nd and 3rd century.

I think something else may be more probable, and a late 17th century Pope nails it:

[Pope Innocent XII](#) believed Candlemas was created as an alternative to Roman Paganism, as stated in a sermon on the subject:

Why do we in this feast carry candles? Because the [Gentiles](#) dedicated the month of February to the infernal gods, and as at the beginning of it [Pluto](#) stole [Proserpine](#), and her mother [Ceres](#) sought her in the night with lighted candles, so they, at the beginning of the month, walked about the city with lighted candles. Because the holy fathers could not extirpate the custom, they ordained that Christians should carry about candles in honor of the Blessed Virgin; and thus what was done before in the honor of Ceres is now done in honor of the Blessed Virgin.

So...is this rather all unsettling to do this pagan thing of ‘playing with the candles’ appropriate for today? Yes, probably! No, not really! Does it matter? No.

Today’s feast day is one of the major holidays across the world. It was the start of a new term in the School Year...Candlemas...Trinity...Michaelmas. In Scotland, it was the day the rents are due to be paid. In parts of the US, there will be people checking the shadow on a ground hog to see if winter will continue for another 6 weeks, or we just have to sit through that film again and again until we get the act of seduction right...

The Churches changed the name of the day after Vatican II. It was no longer the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, but the Presentation of the Lord. The emphasis was not to be on the uncleanness of women post childbirth, but rather the priestly nature of the Christ.

The readings are nice if we look at them with the same rose-coloured glasses as Christmas, but the reality is a bit different.

The readings deal with real change and reform. Malachi likens this priestly function to evil being treated in a refining fire and with fullers soap. (I’m always amused that one entrepreneur in the UK manufactured their soap under the Fullers, knowing they will receive a regular ad from the pulpit!) A fuller’s job was to take wool and through a process of walking all over it make it as whiter than snow and free from impurity. A refining fire removes the dross and impurities from God. Due warning was given to those who needed to change:

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.

Hebrews makes the point even clearer:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

And then, in the beautiful passages of the Presentation, let us not overlook what the prophecy of Simeon actually says.

‘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.’

The redemption of Christ will lead to the atoning grace being presented even to the point of death, and that the child Jesus would grow to be one who will disrupt the way things are. Injustices will be dealt with, those who are outcast and marginalised purified and restored, and the intention of God clearly honoured. The Messianic Mission is clearly to be set to work, and for some, it will come at great cost.

And all the time, we see the feast and take comfort in the beautiful words of the *Nunc Dimittis* and Simeon’s plea to be let alone to die now that he knew the prophecy of seeing the Messiah was fulfilled. Anna, a daughter of Phanuel also praised God...was she the one bearing the candle before Mary? One can only surmise!

And all through this it takes us out of the darkest nights of Christmas (well at least in the Northern Hemisphere) into the light beyond the equinox and onto remembering that the lamb that should have been offered for the child became the child himself upon the cross. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world sets a new mark of purity. He would be a light that indeed brought God beyond the Jewish domain into the Gentile world, and the symbol of light, a candle, is taken into the world today.

At the end of the service today, I invite you to either take your taper home and ponder, like Mary, all these things, or present it in the Temple here as a sign of God’s grace and presence as we make our prayers for those in need of wholeness and healing, and the removal of injustice from the world as we remember the coming of light into the world:

Jesus Christ is the light of the world.

A light no darkness can extinguish.

1. ⁱ Exodus 13:13–15

2. [^] Numbers 18:15-16