



Presentation of Christ in the Temple by Deborah Gyapong

There is some cause for confusion in what we are celebrating today.

The feast is properly called **The Presentation of Christ in the Temple**, but for many years it was associated with the strand of celebrations belonging to devotees of Our Lady, and was called the **Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin**. In the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, both titles for the day are given. Back in the middle ages, the festival was marked by the lighting of many candles to celebrate the light theme, **-a light to lighten the Gentiles** - as Simeon puts it, and so the common people's word for this festival became **Candlemas**. It is a nick-name similar to that which we give to the Feast of **The Nativity of Our Lord**— or just plain **Christmas** to you and me.

Candlemas was popular for many reasons, probably the main one being the effect of the candle light in the dark and cavernous cathedrals and parish churches. The sight of light twinkling from hundreds of candles must have brought a tingle to the spines of the congregations, making them feel engaged visually and emotionally, especially in those regions where February falls in cold and dark winter. And if they were encouraged to participate by lighting candles or bringing them to the church, they would have also felt involved and engaged in worship where normally their role was simply to present themselves to hear the priest sing or say Mass with little congregational participation.

Well those days have gone, and now almost everyone can read the printed words in their own individual booklet, saying and singing responses, as well as holding their candle in the procession which comes at the end of the Mass. And towards the end of the Mass, in keeping with the theme today, we celebrate that famous phrase uttered over the infant Jesus by the aged Simeon by singing the English version of his words which we call Nunc Dimittis.

We sing these words today because from the perspective of Simeon and Anna, we are the Gentiles referred to. It is we here who are prophesied to be the recipients of the light of Christ and it is good that we here acknowledge and celebrate his light and this occasion properly, recognising its origins and development in our order of service and in our prayers and in our thinking.

At the end, as I said, there will be a procession out into the street. In the past, such processions would have been big events associated with the carrying of statues and much incense. The Procession is a religious activity. It makes sense of our worship by expressing in public view what is happening. The Offertory procession shows the people of God bringing forward the gifts of God in bread, wine and water. The procession to the crib at Midnight Mass represents the pilgrimage of our lives which is enlightened and humbled by the birth of Christ. Today's procession symbolises our actions in taking the Christ Light out with us, having received it in and through the Ministry of the Church which is called to bring light into the world.

As we stand in public view outside the building, we will engage in a responsory which will express the theology and atmosphere of Candlemas. We have received the light through the ministry of Christ's Church and so we in turn become the Church, the Body of Christ, taking his light with us wherever we may go in our daily lives.

The light of Christ which we have shared and celebrated throughout the winter festivals started with All Saintside when we all brought in candles from home to represent the saints and martyrs of our Church. Then came Advent with the lighting of the Advent wreath and the sprinkling with Holy Water to signify our new birth in baptism. Then came Christmas with the candlelit Mass and the lights around the crib scene. Then came Epiphany with its emphasis on inner meaning and the discovery of the glory of God in unexpected places, including our own lives. And so today, we move outwards again, carrying with us that Christ Light which we have sung so many songs and carols about over the past few weeks.

Today, we dedicate ourselves and our lives afresh to the simple but difficult task of being Christian people, living the life which Jesus lived in sharing, teaching, healing, giving and seeking justice.