

Candlemas | 29 January 2017 | St Mary's

Haggai 2.1-9; John 2.18-22

I was encouraged last Sunday to realise that I have something in common with St Paul. In the reading from his letter to the Corinthians he wrote *'I did baptize also the household of Stephanus; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.'* If I was asked to write an account of 13 years as Rector, I confess it might be missing some key events. I do have a capacity to forget things. I think Godfrey has forgiven me for forgetting to take an Evensong last summer. But what is reassuring about my time at Cobham and Stoke D'Abernon is that I've been given permission to be who I am. And many have joined me in getting on with the work of being the parish churches of the two parishes.

There was a rather more important message in last week's epistle. Paul wrote the words I quoted because he was reminding the church in Corinth that ministry is not about who is leading the church, it is about Jesus Christ. He went on to say that he wasn't sent to be a great orator, but to proclaim Christ's Gospel, pure and simple. And then he ended with these crucial words, 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' We could modify that phrase for our 21st century secular society. The message about the cross is ignored by many, but to those who listen, believe and respond, it is the power of God.

Today, Candlemas as it is called, is a turning point in the Christian calendar. It is the end point of the linked seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The last of the revelations of who Christ was. Chronologically we have gone back in time after the Epiphany readings.

Over the past few weeks we've read of Jesus' baptism, his first miracles and the calling of his disciples. But at Candlemas we are back with Jesus as a baby, 40 days after he was born, being presented in the Temple.

One of the most moving moments in the life of a church is when a member of the congregation has had a baby and brings their precious child, sometimes just a few days old, to the altar for a blessing. They want to give thanks to God for the miracle of life and share their joy with the church family.

Mary and Joseph took their baby to the Temple in Jerusalem where they were approached by Simeon and Anna. Together Anna and Simeon represent every woman and man who faithfully, quietly serves God. And as Christ was presented to them by his parents, so today Christ is presented to us, in word and sacrament.

Simeon and Anna's responses explain why Candlemas comes at the end, not at the beginning of the Epiphany season. In keeping with the season, Anna and Simeon both declare Christ as the Messiah. They were very old, and there is a sense that they were almost hanging on to life, waiting for this moment when the long awaited saving event for humanity had come. In the passage I quoted from Paul earlier, he said 'but to us who are being saved'. Christ is salvation for all who recognise him. Anna, the faithful prophet is the one who recognises and speaks of Jesus as the child who will redeem Israel, God's people.

It is in Simeon's words to Mary that there is a foreshadowing of the passion of Christ, and why Candlemas leads us from Epiphany towards

Lent and Easter. Simeon declares Christ will be a light to the whole world. But Simeon realises that this will threaten many in Jerusalem, because to proclaim Christ would mean relinquishing self-importance and power, submitting everything to his word. And in some haunting words of what is to come, he says to Mary 'and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' And in an instant we are taken to Mary, inconsolable, weeping at the foot of the cross.

In some churches today with more ritual than ours, the Candlemas service will end with the congregation holding candles and symbolically turning away from the altar to face the door to the church where there will be a large cross. It symbolises the moving forward from the joy of the Christmas story and the revelation of Christ as the Messiah, aware that before long we will be immersed in Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

Those who seek salvation have the task of taking the light of Christ out into the world. We are reminded of that at baptisms and confirmations when the newly baptised or confirmed process out of the church with a lighted candle. At Candlemas the words of Simeon speak to us as those who seek salvation. We share in the task of bringing light to our world; the light that was only fully revealed on the cross and in the resurrected Christ.

So today is a turning point in the Christian year and it is a turning point for our united benefice. For St Mary's, with Godfrey's faithful ministry continuing, the interregnum will not have a major impact. In our benefice there is, as with any church, inevitably quite a lot of focus on the the Rector and the Associate Rector. They are seen as the leaders of the parishes. And that has its pros and cons. St Paul, for all his

prominence, stressed that too much focus on the leader is rather unhelpful. He wrote to the Corinthians when they were divided behind different leaders, 'what I mean is each of you says, "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" ' he then says very pointedly 'Has Christ been divided?'

So I think if Paul was writing a letter to the church in Cobham and Stoke D'Abernon, he would be encouraging us not too dwell long over changes in leadership. He'd just urge us to continue with the work we have been doing for the past few years. During my time as Rector we have seen three Associate Rectors at St Mary's: Rosemary, Diana and now Godfrey. Under their stewardship the parish has flourished at a time when many parishes in the diocese of a similar size and age profile have declined. Of course the work never ends, but we have steadily seen new people coming. With the wonderful new St Mary's Hall we are seeing St Mary's reaching out and serving the community as well as using the new facilities to increase parish activities. The music tradition, as evidenced by tonight's choral evensong, remains as strong as ever.

I said at the beginning that we are all represented by Simeon and Anna. If there is a hallmark of our two churches it is the faithfulness of so many people both young and old. Some like Simeon and Anna of a great age. And yet still seeking salvation, faithfully serving the church, part of its lifeblood. And equally there are those who are not of a great age and yet who are, in a reflection of the new vision for our diocese, transforming our churches and in the process transforming lives.

In just a few months there will be someone in my role who will have the joy I've had of sharing in ministry with so many faithful, inspirational and

hardworking people. From those charged with energy, to others who have quiet, prayerful serenity, and everything in between.

On this Sunday in the Christian year when we turn away from Epiphany and move towards Easter, our benefice moves from another incumbent in its centuries old history and looks towards the next. I am pleased to say, unlike the record on the board at the back of St Andrew's Church for my predecessor William King, in 1644, the churchwardens will not have to add 'Fled' in brackets after my name.

May God continue to bless St Mary's as together, in the footsteps of Anna and Simeon, you seek salvation. Living as his disciples, may you continue to take the light of Christ out into the world.

