

The Meaning of Candlemas

The story of Jesus being brought as a baby to the Temple is in Luke's Gospel. Like all of Luke's stories about Jesus' birth, it is glorified by a Canticle (the *Nunc Dimittis*) which fixes it particularly in the minds of all Catholics who pray Compline, and all Anglicans who sing Evensong. I think the scene does something else which should catch our imagination. Matthew tells us, in his lovely poetry of the Magi, how Jesus would be the light to enlighten the Gentiles (the Magi are not Jews): and in his shocking story of the slaughter of the innocents, he tells us that Jesus will excite the opposition of powerful forces in his homeland – religious as well as civil (king Herod has the priests and scribes at his call).

Luke wants to express the same things, and he does it differently, through the figure of Simeon, a prophet who meets Jesus in the Temple. Luke assures us that Simeon *looked forward to Israel's comforting*, and that *the Holy Spirit rested on him*. Simeon is drawn to the Temple by the Holy Spirit: this meeting is providential.

It's a beautiful touch that Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and blesses God. He gives us an image of Jewishness that recognises the Messiah in Jesus, the "comfort" of Israel for whom he had waited so long. The absence of this response to Jesus brought about the Crucifixion; but Simeon has an openness, prepared by God to correspond to the salvation he was likewise "preparing in the sight of all peoples". Simeon does not say "in the sight of the Gentiles": the salvation God prepared was for Jew and Gentile alike. Of this Simeon himself is perfect proof. Like the shepherds at the manger, Simeon represents a new Israel that will recognize its Master, unlike the Israel accused in the first verses of Isaiah 1.

But if Jesus comes as a light to the Gentiles, he also comes as a sign that is rejected, for the fall and the rising of many in Israel. The whole mystery of Easter lies hidden in these words, as they lie hidden in Matthew's story of the flight into Egypt. Herod is like Pharaoh who decreed the death of the Hebrew children, and Jesus is like Moses who survived to save his people. Here the gentler story of Luke predicts the enmity of Caiaphas, Pilate, and (yes) Herod too, who in Luke alone will play his part in the coalition against Jesus at the end.

It is strange to think of this portentous greeting offered to a little child. But Luke has in mind another prophecy, in Malachi, which draws a picture of the Lord you are awaiting, suddenly entering his Temple, to purify it and to make it capable of sacrifice; of him Malachi says: *Who can endure the day of his coming? Who remain standing when he appears?*

Each year we gather on Candlemas (forty days after Christmas, February 2nd) to meet Christ as he takes possession of his Temple. The Church bids us carry a lighted candle, that great symbol of a life used up in fidelity and prayer. We are being invited to resemble Simeon, who awaited the Messiah in his Temple, and was himself ready to be dismissed as Jesus comes. Surely we can sense the oncoming of the forty-day Lent, with its sacrificial themes, in this holy day.