

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

There's a lot of chatter in church. Some of it about money, some about how we keep the church open, but a lot recently about prayer. Let's talk about prayer, let's do more prayer. We now have a prayer group – we wish more. And the Wednesday study group (between looking through the Gospel of Mark and the forthcoming Lent groups) are spending a few sessions looking (again) at prayer.

As you may know this group is held at our house and the youngest of the brood, with a developing sense of mischief, often joins us. This week, we had discussed prayer and one of the points made was that prayer (and being a Christian) does not mean that we escape the bad things in life. My question was then this: 'what do we hope to have when we face the bad things in life, when we are under pressure, when we are feeling low. A leading question, the answer should have been 'we have each other', 'we have the church', 'we have family and friends to support us'. Instead to the question 'what do have when under pressure and feeling low' came the quick response 'whisky'. Insightful.

Today is Candlemas, a midpoint between Christmas and Easter, and in more ancient terms a midpoint between the shortest day and the spring equinox. We use Candlemas to commemorate the ritual purification of Mary forty days after the birth of her son Jesus. This is why Mary and Joseph and Jesus had travelled from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem to pay their dues before finally making the longer journey home north to Nazareth. Therefore we *also* remember the presentation of Christ in the Temple – his first visit to The Temple.

Note symmetry and contrast: There is Light and Darkness. Jesus comes to the temple close to his birth and an old man, Simeon, says Jesus is the light, a light for revelation to the Gentiles (that's you and me), and the glory of the people Israel. Jesus is the light. But, at the end of his life, Jesus is back in the temple, sucked into an unholy darkness, humiliation, loneliness, torture and death, his last visit to the temple.

Jesus makes his first visit to the temple – that is today's gospel story. But why is today called Candlemas? In tradition today was the day in the year when all the candles that were to be used in the church during the coming year, were brought into church and a blessing was said over them – hence the 'mass' of the candles.

Let's return to the Temple in Jerusalem. Picture the scene. A great courtyard, roughly the same area as a football pitch but square in shape, a place full of life. People coming and going, people from far or near, people staying to buy, to sell, to exchange. Men, children, and women, this the furthest point women were allowed into the temple. People talking, discussing, arguing. Different religious groups competing to be in charge, overlapping with different political groups also competing to be in charge. All debating and defining what it was to be Israel, the essence of nationhood, but all the time under the reality and rule of the *foreign* Roman army.

The talking and debating and arguing goes on and on. With apologies the comparison with today and Brexit inescapable. Impassioned debate on nationhood, the absence of a clear way forward, leading to bitterness, insults and a wider, legitimate sense of anxiety. What next?

Being the people of Israel clearly has been no protection from bad things happening. Being British gives little protection from life's turbulence. Being Christian, having prayer, does not stop the bad things happening in life to us. Our God is not a bullet proof vest nor an invisibility cloak when we wish to escape from the world.

There's something encouraging, however, and peaceful in the presence of Simeon and Anna. Simeon, amongst this melee, this argument, bitterness and anxiety, was righteous, devout, and he was waiting. We presume he was old. We know Anna was "very old" – 84 years old. She worshipped night and day, she fasted and prayed. He holds Jesus and praises God, she comes to Jesus gives thanks to God.

In the midst of the melee and chaos of the temple Simeon and Anna, righteous, devout, waiting, and praying: praising God and giving thanks. It falls on the people of God in each and every generation to face their own anxiety and uncertainty and chaos by waiting and praying, praising and giving thanks.

Jesus himself faced darkness and chaos: righteous, devout, waiting, and praying: praising and giving thanks. His prayer in John was not that we are taken out of the world but that we are given strength to persevere with whatever we may face within the world. Not for him the desperate psalm that looks to the hills, for perhaps God is there. Not for him the wings of a dove to fly far, far away. For if we wish to find God we find him here in the anxiety and uncertainty and

darkness and chaos. In our reading from Hebrews shares in our humanity, the love that brings light into dark places, and order where there is chaos, is the reason why he had to be made like us.

By coming to church and praying and worshipping God we do not lock the door to stop the world coming in, nor do we lock the door to keep ourselves from going out. Through worship and prayer there is no a bullet proof vest nor an invisibility cloak.

Instead of waiting like Simeon and Anna we could run – many people do, believing that there is an escape, or God cannot be here – he is somewhere else, perhaps playing hide and seek. But at Candlemas we are encourage and should encourage others that however dark and chaotic our world may seem the light of Christ is here. Consider the images in this psalm: Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

In this life I fear that I will always be part of ‘the darkness’, part of ‘the problem’. But through prayer I become less ‘part of the problem’. In this life I fear that I will continue to underachieve, to not do all the good that I could-do and I should-do, but through prayer I become a greater part of the solution, Christ becomes a greater part of me.

Today on Candlemas you will light a candle. We will rejoice in the light, our light, but think also of our darkness, the darkness we face and the darkness we have made. In prayer we embrace ‘the light’ as we work through, continue to work through, our darkness. In prayer Christ is to become a greater part, always a greater part of you.