

(Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-end; Luke 2:2-22)

I don't know if it is the same for you, but each year the first snowdrops I see are the ones just outside our church door. This year's crop appeared three weeks ago, and now our hearts are gladdened at the sight of similar appearances everywhere!

As the February issue of the Parish Magazine reminds us, snowdrops are also known as 'Candlemas Bells'. Their arrival is a wonderful *manifestation* of the climax to the Epiphany Season.

We and many other churches are bringing forward the 40th day of Christmas from the 2nd of February to today so that we can all celebrate its significance together. Forty days after childbirth, Jewish law required a mother to visit the temple to undergo a purification ritual, and a firstborn son to be 'presented' to God. But our focus today is not on temple ritual but rather on the parts played by Simeon and Anna in recognising who Jesus was. As we heard, Simeon declared that Jesus would become 'the light to lighten the nations'. Hence 'Candlemas'.

Now the Candlemas Procession at Ripon Cathedral is quite an experience. In a normal year, the whole congregation will be involved, moving around the building and experiencing from within the symbolic power of a 'temple' filled with living light. Many candles together combine to illustrate how we, who are the Body of Christ, collectively lit from within by the light of Christ, can be a light to the world.

The primary purpose of candles is of course to produce light rather than heat. So to speak of 'more light than heat' would be to reverse the famous phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When the character Polonius spoke of "more heat than light" he was suggesting that fire and heat represent passion and sincerity, whilst light is insubstantial. But lawyers would disagree: for them, heat refers to impassioned but unenlightening rhetoric, and light to substantive argument. *Without prejudice*, I might ask which of these are we observing in the ongoing 'power-play' of Westminster?

In this respect, if our aim is, like a candle, to give 'more light than heat' then may I direct your gaze towards our candle stand. This is the place where prayers are offered by so many of us, with 'Ruth's window' as a backdrop. And Ruth's window, like all the other stained glass windows of our church, tells a story.

Indeed, stained glass windows are another illustration of how we can bring light to the world. You see, whereas a painting relies on reflected light to convey its colours, stained glass allows a deeper, more vivid quality – with the light passing through the composition on its way to the eye. So a stained glass window brings the scene it depicts to life in a way that no painting ever can.

Transcending even this quality is a subject which is itself a source of light. So in the child Jesus Simeon and Anna see the light of the world. They did not see him by reflected light, or even by transmitted light, but – in the words of the psalmist – '...with you is the fountain of life, and in your light do we see light'. Truly, at his Presentation in the Temple Christ's glory was revealed!

And this is what we are invited to see when we light our Candlemas candles, towards the end of the service. Just like at the cathedral, we may not be able to process around the church, but as our candlelight combines with that of those around us we will still have a deep sense, each of us lit from within by the light of Christ, of being able collectively to reveal God's glory to the world.

After today, as we leave behind the Epiphany season and move towards Lent we will enter a short period of so-called 'Ordinary Time'. This space between those two very different seasons will give us the opportunity to take in the idea that whilst Epiphany reminded us of various ways in which Christ's glory was revealed, his ultimate glory was revealed through his death on the Cross.

On the Sunday before Lent begins we will hear about the Transfiguration of Christ – the event which took place as Jesus 'turned his face' towards Jerusalem for the final time. At his baptism the disciples had already heard the voice from heaven affirming Jesus to be the Son of the omnipotent God. In the Transfiguration they were given a glimpse of the glory that lay beyond the suffering that was to come.

And we need reminding of this, too. As we prepare to observe a 'holy Lent' we will want to engage once again with Christ's 'redemptive suffering' – his Passion – being at the very heart of our faith. If the message of Christ's Incarnation is that he became like us in order that we might become like him then the message of his Passion concerns the process by which this is to take place. In Christ all that is imperfect in us is redeemed.

Again, the words of the psalmist can help us: 'Lord, you are always with me, you hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel and afterwards receive me with glory.'

Today, we recall that each of us is called by God to be a light to the world. Simeon recognised that Jesus would become *the* Light of the world: that Jesus would succeed where God's chosen people, Israel, had failed. But he will only succeed if we, who together now make up the Body of Christ – the new Israel – respond to God's call. So in our words and our actions, individually and together, may the light of Christ shine through us, whether as candles or as windows!

George Herbert's poem, *The Windows*, captures this beautifully:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?
he is a brittle crazie glass;
yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
this glorious and transcendent place,
to be a window, through thy grace.

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
when they combine and mingle, bring
a strong regard and awe; but speech alone
doth vanish like a flaring thing,
and in the ear, not conscience, ring.

Thanks be to God for his call, his grace, his light. Amen.