Malachi 3: 1-5; Hebrews 2: 14-end; Luke 2: 22-40

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Our Christian forbears would have been very excited today. Because today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas: the last great festival of the cycle of Christmas before we turn our eyes towards Lent and Easter.

If we had lived back in the fifteenth century, we would have woken up really hungry this morning because we would have had only bread and water yesterday, in preparation for today.

There would have been a procession, re-enacting the journey Mary and Joseph made to Jerusalem to present the baby Jesus in the Temple. (Today is also known as the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, but you will see why I refer to it as Candlemas). There would have been singing and great parish feasting.

Many of the prayers offered would have made reference to the retreat of darkness – both literal (given that Candlemas falls at the beginning of February) and metaphorical. Every parishioner would have a candle to carry in the procession and would then offer it to the priest, along with a penny. Maybe we’ll try it another year….

The candles were blessed and then left to burn all day and all night in front of an image of Mary, as a sign of devotion. There is the story of one 14th century priest who waited until his parishioners had gone home and then stole all the candles, presumably for his own use, although that is not recorded. Candles were precious commodities in those days.

Candles blessed on the feast of the Presentation were believed to have particularly sacred power, so not all of them were left in church. People brought other candles too, and these ones were blessed with the words: Wherever they shall be lit or set up, may the devil and all his ministers flee away in fear and trembling, out of those dwellings, and never again disquiet these your servants.

 The candles were then lit during thunderstorms or family illness, and the dying were given the blessed candle to hold as the words of the Nunc Dimittis were recited; words we heard in the gospel just now: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.

It might sound like twaddle to us now in the 21st century, but in the cold and darkness of a house without central heating or electric light, who’s to say we wouldn’t want to light a blessed candle for a frightened or sick person or during a thunderstorm? And as for giving a dying person the candle to hold: it sounds like a health and safety nightmare, and a recipe for disaster, but seen symbolically, it was giving hope in Christ, a light for the journey into death’s dark vale. Faith was a part of the whole life; not just for Sundays.

In due course, this celebration with lighting of the candles died out. The Reformation (1517 – 1648) came to pass, and candles, ash on Ash Wednesday, palms on Palm Sunday – all that was banned. Some of those, thankfully, have returned to our cycle of the Church’s year – these acts of faithfulness are important to our understanding of who we are as people of faith. As I said last week, doing the acts leads us to better understanding of the words and of who God is. Through them we explore the richness and mystery of God.

Interestingly, candles don’t even get a mention in the gospel story this morning. But the connections between light and dark are nonetheless prominent. The key encounter is the one between the old man and the new baby – new light bursts in on the weary period of waiting. The curtains are drawn back and the light is revealed. We can see the message of hope that permeates the scene.

But alongside that hope there is also some remaining darkness – the foreboding in the words of Simeon to Mary: and a sword will pierce your own soul too. The prediction of pain to come. It might not be a scientific explanation, but light and dark are recognised and understood in relation to each other. Darkness is the absence of light, and light, the absence of darkness.

And while candles may come and go, the light and dark thing can be so often true in our own lives: our faith ebbs and flows, our experiences veer from joy to sorrow and back again. We can use the cycle of the church’s year to pause and take stock of where we are, to work out what matters to us, to appreciate faith as the gift it is.

I read somewhere that one of Hollywood’s biggest wanted to be a star but resented having to twinkle. We Christians are required to twinkle – to reveal the light of Christ often when we really don’t feel very twinkly ourselves. But just stretching that metaphor a bit further, we aren’t called to be stars. Yes, we need to be lights to others, but more than lights, we need to be warmth too. We need to shine the light in all the forgotten corners and draw all the forgotten people near to the flame. When you pass the light to other people, your candle doesn’t go out; it is the same size as it was, and so the volume of light increases exponentially the more it is shared.

**I finish with a little story:**

The proper date of the Presentation is actually 2nd February, but we transfer it to Sunday so that we can all mark it and learn about it together.

The previous day, the 1st February, is the feast day of St Brigid, Abbess of Kildare, an early Irish nun who is credited with founding several religious communities. She was particularly well-known for her generosity to the poor, and her gifts of healing and wisdom caused her to become known as The Mary of the Gaels, (those who spoke the Gaelic languages), such that a common blessing at the time was: Brigid and Mary be with you. When she died, it is said that the sisters at the Kildare convent kept a perpetual fire burning in her memory right up until the early 1200s. It was relit and burned for a further 400 years until the Reformation finally put it out.

With her feast day right next to the feast of the Presentation of Christ and the purification of Mary in the Temple, and with the importance of fire in the stories of her life, it is no surprise that Brigid appears among the Candlemas legends, albeit strangely time-warped.

It was said that, when Mary went up to the Temple for purification Brigid walked ahead of her with a lighted candle in each hand. Bear in mind that the Temple was built on high land where the winds were strong, and the flames were unprotected, yet apparently they didn’t even flicker, let alone blow out completely. There doesn’t seem to be an end to the story as such – just this picture of Brigid as the original acolyte, the candle-carrying companion.

So as we celebrate Candlemas, we remember the symbolism of candles and the necessity of bearing the light to and for others, but also of accepting the light offered to us by others.

At various times on our own Christian journeys, we will be both Mary, her way lit by the light carried by someone else, and Brigid, carrying that light for a fellow-traveller in need.

May the light of Christ be yours now and always.

**Amen**