

## Candlemas – January 29<sup>th</sup> 2023 – Brian Griffiths

One of my favourite comedy sketches of all time is the classic 'Four Candles' with the two Ronnies – Corbett and Barker. It's so well loved that charity Christmas Cards are sold with a picture of four candles and 'fork handles' on the front and at Ronnie Corbett's funeral a couple of years ago in St John's Church, Shirley, they lit four candles on the altar. In the sketch, Ronnie Barker has just asked for some 'O's' – not garden hose, not hoes to remove weeds or even pantie hose – he wants letter O's for the gate. He goes on to his next item on the list:



*RB:* Got any 'P's'?

*RC:* Oh now why didn't you say while I'd got the box of letters down here? I'm working me guts out here climbing about all over the shop putting things back and then getting 'em out again. Now then, how many? Two?

*RB:* No — peas — three tins of peas!

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking what's all this got to do with our celebration of Candlemas today? He's finally lost the plot! Well it's not about tinned peas, but it is about 'P's' – the six 'P's' of Candlemas – Pigeons, Parents, Prophecy, Praise, Prayer, and Patience.

Luke's account of Jesus being presented in the Temple is one of the loveliest and most moving encounters in the New Testament, if not the whole Bible. It involves people from all stages of life – the young baby Jesus, his parents Mary and Joseph and the two old people Simeon and Anna. As we shall see, it is drenched in prayer, praise and prophecy. It is always celebrated 40 days after Christmas – officially 2<sup>nd</sup> February. In days gone by, some believed that the weather on this day would show the weather for the rest of the winter – hence the rhyme:

*'If Candlemas Day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another fight.  
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,  
Winter won't come again.'*

Candlemas is an important feast day in countries all around the world. For example, in France and Belgium it's called **La Chandeleur**. By tradition, crêpes are eaten on this day. In Germany, it is celebrated as the start of the agricultural year. Candlemas is sometimes described as a 'hinge festival'. In other words, it's a link between Christmas and Lent. So, after today's service the nativity scenes in both churches will be packed away ready for next Christmas.

In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the law stated that parents of the first born son were to offer a sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon as a thanksgiving and as a reminder of how the children of Israel were spared and allowed to escape from captivity in Egypt. Poor parents who couldn't afford a lamb had to offer two pigeons instead. So, here we have the first 'P' of Candlemas— **pigeons**. Joseph and Mary were poor so they offered two pigeons. Luke's Gospel is often called 'The Gospel of the Poor' and here he illustrates explicitly the poverty that Jesus was born into. Jesus came to earth to identify with the poor and disadvantaged and here we see the poor offering given as thanks to God for his birth.

The second 'P' is for **parents** – Mary and Joseph. Luke tells the story from Mary's standpoint as he often does in the Christmas narrative. I really feel for Joseph. Luke hardly mentions him. If you look at paintings of this scene by famous artists, Joseph is often depicted in the shadows – very much on the background. Indeed, in one depiction hanging in the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, Joseph isn't included at all. In another painting by Guercino, also in the National Gallery, Joseph is depicted as being quite old – a real contrast to the young Mary and the infant Jesus. But Joseph plays just as important a role as Mary in bringing Jesus to the Temple. God chose both Mary and Joseph to be parents of the Christ child. This ceremony is for both parents and not only is it a celebration of the gift of a child it's also about thanksgiving that Joseph and Mary were chosen by God to be Jesus' parents.

In the Temple were two elderly people – Simeon and Anna. Simeon was a very devout man. He was in the Temple courts when the Holy Family arrived and, immediately, he recognised who Jesus was. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit had made it clear to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Christ-child. So he takes Jesus in his arms and sings his amazing song of **praise** and **prophecy** (Two more Candlemas 'P's') – those familiar and beautiful words sung at Evensong – the Nunc Dimittis.

***“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,  
According to Your word;  
For my eyes have seen Your salvation  
Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,  
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,  
And the glory of Your people Israel.”***

In the Christmas story there are many songs – Mary’s song (The Magnificat-part of Evensong), Zechariah’s Song (The Benedictus - part of Morning Prayer) and now the Song of Simeon. Sadly, there’s no song of Joseph! I hope that you are feeling as sorry for Joseph as I do!! However, there is one thing above all else that links every character in the Candlemas narrative – It’s the Holy Spirit. It’s the Holy Spirit that brings Simeon and Anna to the Temple day after day as they waited expectantly. It’s the Spirit that shows them that the baby Jesus is the light that they have been waiting so long for. It’s the Spirit that reveals to them that he is the promised Messiah and that he is light for the whole world.

Simeon has a rather darker prophecy for Mary. After blessing Joseph and Mary he says:

***“Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.***

Mary must have been utterly shocked by what he said – what a lot she had to ponder on in her heart. Maybe she thought back to this moment when she stood with John at the foot of the Cross.

Luke tells us that Anna never left the Temple. She worshipped there night and day fasting and **praying** – the 5<sup>th</sup> ‘P’. Her life of prayer was hugely important. She had dedicated her life to God and through her prayer she was able to see God himself in the form of the baby Jesus. It’s through the Spirit that her and Simeon’s prayers are answered and their hopes and dreams are fulfilled. Having seen Jesus, Anna couldn’t help telling everyone about the good news that the Messiah had come.

We see in Simeon and Anna great **patience** – the 6<sup>th</sup> ‘P’. They didn’t get instant answers. They waited in hope that they would see Jesus. They are a great example to all of us of patient prayer and worship. Anna, in particular, lived a

life of humble patience. She was 84 years old. She was a widow, and her life was fully dedicated to God; and what stands out is that Anna had not allowed bereavement to destroy her. Instead, Anna was living a life of devotion to God – a life of prayer and patience.

So there we have it - the six 'P's' of Candlemas – Pigeons, Parents, Prophecy, Praise, Prayer, Patience. They are there to remind us:

That we, like Jesus, must come alongside the poor and disadvantaged.  
To give thanks for parents and to remember that children are a gift from God  
To speak out for God into difficult situations in our world  
To praise our Lord and Saviour knowing that he is good news for everyone  
To remain constant in prayer even when God seems silent  
To wait patiently for God to fulfil our dreams and hopes.

The six 'P's' of Candlemas. Which of the six are most relevant to us and to St Mary's and St Francis' right now? Perhaps it is all six, but maybe today it is just one or two of them. I know that for quite a few people here it is pretty difficult to praise God and to pray with patience when we are experiencing storms in our lives. That's why we are going to be starting our sermon series 'God on Mute' in the next few weeks. However, if we feel like that then we just need to think of Simeon and Anna who were constant and patient in worship and prayer. They were rewarded when they saw Jesus – the light - and they were completely taken aback when their hopes and dreams became a reality. So too may we be blessed with the light and grace of Jesus.

***Lord God, you kept faith with Simeon and Anna and showed them the infant King. Give us grace to put all our trust in your promises, and the patience to wait for their fulfilment; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN***

So, may the 'P's' of the Lord be always with us