

## Pure in Heart

OT Reading: Malachi 3:1-5

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

### Candlemas

Today, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, falls exactly forty days after The birth of Jesus, which was the time set out in the law for a new mother to undergo a purification ritual. This is the final story of Luke's birth and infancy narrative and so marks the end of Christmastide. The purification ceremony symbolises that every child is a gift from God. This is also known as the feast of Candlemas, which some churches celebrate with the bearing of candles, symbolising the gift of pure, unwavering light which the infant Jesus brings to the world.

The definition of purity is complex. It can mean simple, refined, free from contamination, or ritually clean. Malachi refers of the Lord of Hosts as "like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap ... [who] will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold or silver". But even the purest carat gold contains traces of other elements. Fuller's soap is simple and natural, but as soon as one uses it, it becomes contaminated and has to be washed clean again. When you think about it, absolute purity is almost impossible to obtain.

Purity can also have a dark side. Last week we remembered the how Nazi Germany developed a theory of racial purity in an effort to create a master race by eliminating Jews, Slavs, Roma and the disabled. While that may be the most appalling example, ethnic cleansing is still an issue in many parts of the world today. It remains a great irony that purity can be such a contaminated word.

Religion and faith also make something of purity. We have heard about the purification ritual that Mary undertook following the birth of her son; and Orthodox Jews still have strict laws about washing before meals, dietary restrictions, avoiding the sick or unclean and so on (if you want to know more, read Leviticus). Many other faith traditions also have symbolic rituals around cleanliness such as the washing away of one's sins at baptism. And it wasn't so long ago that people put on their Sunday Best and women wore their best hats when coming to church.

However, a note of caution: in seeking purity, if we are not careful it can become the opposite of what we intend. Consider the Pharisee in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. With his rule keeping and his judgement of others, he failed to see the distortion of purity in his own soul. It is possible for a person to become so focussed on heaven that he is of no earthly use.

"Blessed are the pure in heart", said Jesus, by which he meant those who

are honest, compassionate and who seek to do God's will in all things. But Jesus was not particularly interested in the *external* purity gained by following man made rules. His disciples failed to wash their hands before eating. He mixed with sinners, the sick and the socially unclean. His mission was to serve the poor, the outcast and the marginalised. While he did not condemn the purity laws, he refused to allow them to get in the way of healing and compassion.

Purity is seldom long lasting. A washed utensil remains clean only until it is used – and its purpose is to be used. A clean house remains clean only if it is not lived in. A life of faith remains pure only as long as it does not engage with the world. But its purpose is to work in our often messy world. And engagement, working in the world can sometimes make faith less pure. But that is as it should be. Faith has to adapt, sometimes to compromise and always to grow and evolve. Real faith is not meant to always be clothed in its Sunday best. Sometimes it needs to get untidy, frayed and torn; then cleaned, mended and repaired before returning to work again. In that way faith can bring light to the world.

The feast of Candlemas, which we celebrate today, is the final festival in the cycle of light. Two months ago Advent began with the lighting of candles in anticipation of Christ's birth. Christmas brought angelic light leading the shepherds to the family in the stable. Epiphany celebrates the light of the star leading seekers to the birthplace. As Epiphany progresses the light expands. The final moment of this expansion is Candlemas, when the whole world is set ablaze with the manifestation of God's love.

Christian feast days are theological, but they are also seasonal. This day falls halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, and is the time when many ancient people rejoiced as they watched the earth awaken to new life. It marks the season of lengthening days, new growth of fruit and flowers, new lambs and the return of light to the world.

There is an old tradition in which people brought their candles to church on this day to be blessed, and then walked through towns or villages in candlelit processions, so bearing the light into the world. In these days of electric light we may forget how precious candles were in medieval times, as they drove away the darkness of those long nights. Today they shine on our Gospel story, as old Simeon and Anna meet the new born Jesus, or to put it another way, an old weary world meets fresh new life. After years of prayer and worship, these two held in their arms the light of the world, come to shine to and through all of God's people.

There are no more candles than usual here this morning, because we are

the candles. We have been brought here, as Anna and Simeon were, by the Holy Spirit to have our hope restored, to be set alight once more by the light of Christ's love and to shine his light into the darkest corners of the world.

As in the past, our present world is living through dark times. But in those dark places, and in this place today, there are many people who shine in the darkness. They may not think of themselves as particularly pure, and their hands may not always be spotlessly clean, but we know who they are: those brave souls who work to make the world a better place, visiting prisons and hospitals, bringing meals to the hungry, care to the sick, and comfort to the despairing. Those thoughtful souls whose words of encouragement keep us going, whose little acts of kindness bring light to our darkest hours. Those whose motivation is pure generosity, pure caring, pure love. When we think of these people, perhaps purity is not so far away after all.

As we seek to bring light to the world, may God grant us pure hearts, loving minds and caring hands.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden  
St. Mary's, Holmbury  
and St. John's, Wotton  
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