

Today we celebrate a major feast, a “Red Letter Day”, so-called because in some editions of the Book of Common Prayer, these feast days, appearing after the normal Sunday propers in the prayer book, were printed in Red. There are many minor feast days throughout the year that yield their normal date for the regular Sunday propers, but once or twice a month, we gather to celebrate major feast days for Apostles, Evangelists, Martyrs, or for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Such feasts remind us of the reality of the historic events and the steadfast faith of the first generation of believers upon which our faith stands.

Today, the feast day overlaps our normal Sunday worship, and thus the Red-letter day is given precedence over our normal 4th Sunday after Epiphany celebration. Because Moses specified that this ritual was to be performed 40 days after the birth of a boy, we set The Feast of the Purification 40 days after the Nativity of Christ which brings us to February the second, today.

There are three names given to this feast. The first is the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin. This is the occasion why the Holy Family came to the temple in the first place. According to the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 12, a woman was considered ceremonially unclean for 40 days after giving birth to a boy child – it was twice as long for giving birth to a girl.

After the days of her purification had ended, she was to then bring two offerings to the temple. She first brought a sin offering, for we may approach God only when the debt of our sin had been paid. Of course, according to the book of Hebrews, temple sacrifices never really took away sin, but they were symbolic of the sacrifice of Christ which did atone for all the sin of those who believe in Him. Once the debt of the sin of the world had been paid by Christ, then blood sacrifices ceased. The sin offering to be made by a woman after childbirth was either a turtledove or a pigeon.

The second sacrifice made by the woman was a whole burnt offering. This offering symbolized the complete offering of the person to the Lord God. The entire animal was consumed by fire, it ascended into the heavens for a sweet smelling aroma to God. We see here part of the pattern in which we participate in our worship. First, we confess our sins,

and then we are able to completely offer ourselves, body and soul, up to God. St. Paul in Romans 12 draws upon this imagery when he exhorts, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Now the expected whole burnt offering was a yearling lamb, but we don't see Mary bringing this sacrifice with her. Provision is made in Leviticus for those who cannot afford a lamb to bring a second dove or pigeon in its place. We understand that the Holy Family was not wealthy because of the sacrifice of two birds, not of a lamb and a bird, that Mary brought.

Now of course the second name given to this feast is the Presentation of Christ in the temple for when Mary comes to bring her sin offering and her whole burnt offering of two doves, it must not escape our notice that the final sacrifice that would be offered for her, and for all of us too, was swaddled in her arms. This was not yet the time for that sacrifice, but it would happen soon enough. The years of waiting for the reconciliation between God and man were drawing to a close. In Jesus' day, there was an apocalyptic sense in Israel because of the prophecy of Daniel's 70 weeks.

Enter Simeon. "And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ." So the baby Jesus is recognized by this old and godly man. Likewise, an old prophetess, Anna, recognized that this child was the Christ, the lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world. In this event the Messiah is presented to those in the temple who, being devout, being sensitive to the Spirit of God, apprehend Him to be the Savior of the world.

Thus, Simeon finally had seen the Consolation of Israel. He was able to enter into his eternal rest in confidence, knowing that the Messiah had come. Inspired by the Spirit in this moment, he burst into song. "LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, * according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen * thy salvation, Which thou hast

prepared * before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, * and to be the glory of thy people Israel." You will recognize this song as the Nunc Dimittis which we sing traditionally at every evensong and which we chanted this morning during our blessing of the candles.

The key phrase here, which fits in with the Epiphany season, and from which we get our third name for this feast, Candlemas, is "To be a light to lighten the Gentiles." Christ is not only the glory of Israel, the radiance of God's chosen people, but He is the light of the world, calling to the Gentiles and banishing the darkness of sin. We are so accustomed to electric lights – so convenient and reliable and bright – that we really don't have a good context in which to understand the importance of candles. Yet for centuries, candles and oil lamps produced the light by which human beings lived once the sun disappeared beneath the horizon. You might recall in your experience an evening power outage. They aren't even convenient (in fact, they are really frustrating) but do remind us of the importance of light for any activity after the sun goes down.

What Simeon understands in his song, is that Jesus Christ is indeed the light of the world, the spiritual sun that never goes down. Christ is the light by which our souls understand God. Christ illuminates our fallen minds and hearts so that they now are able to contemplate salvation and salvation's author. The light of Christ enable the new life of God for without Christ, we cannot see in the darkness of the fallen world. Candlemas brings these images to our minds, and when we light these candles which we blessed this morning, may we always be reminded of the light of Christ and be appropriately grateful.

Thought the life of Christ is a gift to us, we must simultaneously acknowledge that not everyone welcomes the light, and Simeon speaks words to the virgin mother to this effect. To her he says, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." The light exposes the truth and about the world and about us. And what is revealed is not all that pretty for it is more often hate

instead of love. When Christ appears, judgment must follow. Jesus does not let us maintain neutrality. Every person either must accept Him or reject Him. Embracing Christ is embracing the light of the world, the light of the soul. Embracing Christ is the only way to be cured of our sin and to be made whole. The infirmity must be illuminated to be seen, and it must be seen to be understood, and only when it is understood can it be addressed, removed, cured.

As we grow closer to Christ, as we are drawn ever closer to the light, let us not forget or despise those who recoil at the light. But for the grace of God, there go we. Christ came to save the lost. Christ isn't just the glory of His people, but He came to enlighten those outside of the church and to draw them in. Christ died for them, and as His disciples, we must always diligently consider how we may reach them with the love of God. Such work begins with prayer and then meeting them and listening to them. It is a difficult thing to open up to Christ and allow Him to illuminate one's soul for no one likes what is revealed when this happens. But by God's grace in our love of others, souls will turn to the light. The Kingdom of God will advance in the world.

Today, we celebrate a wonderful feast. Christ enters the temple for the first time where He is recognized as the God for whom the temple exists. The glory of God filled the temple and from there, radiated out into the world. Finally though, let us recognize that we, the people of God, are collectively the temple of God. Christ is present with us, and in the sacrament, Christ presents Himself afresh to us. Let us glory in the light of Christ, and let us prepare to receive Him in these gifts of bread and wine.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.