

Shine as a light in the darkness...



Do not be afraid.

The voice of the prophet Malachi echoes down the centuries.

God has not forgotten his people.

He will come in justice, to overthrow oppression, and set the poor and those who no one listens to, right in the centre. And he will look into every single heart... and throw out selfishness and shame.

Because selfishness and shame break down connections of love, and lead to fear and pain.

God will come back to the temple

.....in *power and might*.

But what is power?

I don't know if you have ever had a baby placed in your arms. It is an incredibly powerful experience. There is this huge sense of possibility, of hope, a sense of new beginnings, and yet of fragility, and vulnerability. Touching that birth, somehow often births something new in us. A tenderness, a fierceness of protection, a stirring to new life.

Babies have immense power. People will do anything to protect them. And around them forms community; connections of love that feed and nourish ... and somehow receive as much as it gives.

The greatest power in the world, I believe, is Love.

And it's in a baby, that old Simeon and Anna, steeped in prayer and scripture, recognise that coming of God that Malachi promised.

Jesus enters the temple to bless it, and to receive the rites of the Church. Because living in community matters. Because the love we share together is a world-changing force, and because it is often where we steep ourselves in the prayer and scripture that help us to recognise Truth when it comes to meet us.

And in a quiet corner of the temple, (not the great grand spaces where the rich make their offerings), joyously, two old, holy, saints, and a young couple struggling to make ends meet, proclaim the Light of the world. Together.

Simeon blesses Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of the Church, Mother of us all...

To be blessed is to be included in the purpose of God. To be where Jesus is. Part of all that matters. We are blessed by compassion, empathy and love; facing all that comes with each other, and with God.

And love knows that sometimes this is joyous, and sometimes it is heartbreakingly hard.

But love knows that it would rather be no-where else.

And in this way, Jesus blesses ritual, and community, and church.... Later we will see him there again and again, coming to pray, to talk with the teachers, to heal and to bless... and yes, to challenge.

For light is protection and comfort, guidance and hope... and yet Light also shines into dark corners, scatters shadows, and reveals things unseen.

Simeon says that a sword will pierce Mary's heart, but there will be joy and light, glory and new life.

Sisters and brothers, a sword is piercing our hearts. The sword of sadness and pain, of the struggles of this world – the huge injustices and pains of war and hunger and oppression and fear, of climate change and political misuse of power. The troubles and disunity in the Church. The sword of the everyday struggles of life, of those things that weigh on our hearts, those inner scars and fears and sadnesses we all carry, our insecurity, our sorrow, our anxiety.

Candlemas sits directly between the two equinoxes, the day with the longest night and the day with the shortest darkness. It points us both back and forth, to the baby born into darkness, and the blaze of easter dawn. It is a feast that turns us from the joy of the birth to the sword that pierces the heart; from the cradle where Love comes down among us, to the path to the cross where Love walks with us.

It is a feast that calls us to recognise that living with Incarnate Love is not just Shepherds and Angels but sometimes a tough and stumbling way on through the everyday together, but promises us that even when the trees and the sparkle go, there is a light that walks with us, guiding us through the darkness to the dawn of Easter.

A light that comforts us in the dark

and promises that more can be mended than we know.

That calls us to go out in his Name,

and to share his Life and Healing.

Are we willing to accept this invitation? To open our hearts to the Light of God's gaze? To ask him to fill us with his light, so that we

may bear it to others? To shine as a light in the darkness, as our baptism service proclaims?

It might seem a little daunting...

And yet, it is a message that if we allow it to dwell in us, brings such peace – Simeon proclaims his song – *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in **peace**, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*

Thomas Merton, monk and spiritual writer, writes about sitting in the Great Forty Days of Easter, just gazing upon the single flame of the paschal candle in the darkness of the monastery chapel. He said that simple warm flame glowing in the darkness said all he really needed to know about the presence and the power to transform that Our Lord shares with us. It gave him great peace, the peace which rests in a power of love that holds all in the light, and yet loves it, that shines light into the darkness, and scatters it.

Perhaps as we take home our blessed candles later we might take a little time in the coming season of Lent, to gaze, and to allow God's peace to embody itself in us.

Sisters and brothers, as we turn from Crib to Cross we set our hearts upon the path of love, and peace. Like Mary and Joseph, the greatest power in the world nestles in our hands every week at communion, every day in our prayers, teaching us to come to be fed; to break and to share, to be still at our heart, and active in our service. Teaching us to listen – yes even to the old, the young, the poor, and all the people no-one listens to. Teaching us to join our song to theirs.

As we look to open our doors and our hearts this year, to build on our coffee morning, our link with the school, to open ourselves to listen, and to be a space that Jesus enters in love... let us pray his light shines brightly, his peace blesses widely in a world so troubled.

In the winter darkness, and yet with the signs of Spring shooting up, literally, all around us, let us trust in God's presence with us, as people, as a community, as a Church.

And let us, like Anna and Simeon, sing songs of praise. Together.

Because God has come to his temple in power and might.

And what is real power, but Love, shining bright into the darkness?