

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : February 9th 2020
“Third Sunday before Lent”

SERMON – 3rd before Lent 2020

Last week, we celebrated Candlemas, with its familiar story which commemorated the presentation of Christ in the Temple. In our Gospel reading last Sunday we heard the account, where Simeon plays a key role. He had recognised the tiny baby for who he was – he opened his eyes and saw the light. The feast of Candlemas signified the end of the Christmas season – and I for one felt a certain sense of completeness as we ended the Christmas season, put away the crib figures and enjoy a short liturgical break before the start of Lent. So we also move on in our study of the life and ministry of Jesus, short though that will prove to be. The baby grows up, becomes a man, is baptised and commissioned by God and begins his work and ministry of teaching the people to love God and love and care for their neighbours.

But there is a problem. The problem is that many in our world really prefer to keep the baby in the crib; they don't want the child to grow up to become the man that challenged then and challenges now. We all know those who admire a baby or a small child but then add wistfully 'shame they have to grow up'.

But maybe Jesus of Nazareth also has a problem with those who want to keep the Church from growing up. I've got a cartoon, with a picture of Jesus by a Christmas tree, holding a model Church building. God is saying "What's wrong, Jesus? You said you wanted a Church for your birthday?" And Jesus is replying "Yeah, I did – but I'm having trouble getting it out of the box". But we must move on, we must get out of the box. We must grow both in our personal life and in the life of our church – we must mature and be mature.

Light was the primary feature of last week's feast, and the theme of light, along with salt, continues today. Salt and light can both make a real difference. Apart from its qualities of preservation, a pinch of salt can bring out the flavour of the other

ingredients. Light allows everyone in the room to see shapes and objects which might otherwise be hidden by darkness. And so we are all, as Christians, undeniably called to be salt and light to the world. We are encouraged to live our lives so that our way of living brings out in other people their full flavour and potential. We are encouraged to live our lives so that our way of living helps people see where they are going. There is no getting away from it – we all have to be responsible children and adults if we are to have credibility in the eyes of others who watch us carefully. It is by our loving reverence and care for one another that makes all the difference. The Gospels are full of incidents where people noticed this in their encounters with Jesus – and it follows that others notice the difference which our faith makes in our encounters with them. Of course there are many good and kind people in our world who have no connections at all with any religious faith – but we know, deep in our hearts, that we can only behave as salt and light if we are the genuine people God wants us to be, people who are prepared to work in co-operation with God and in co-operation with one another. That is where it is so vital to have our faith ‘earthed’ in practical living.

For example, it is why it is so important that people are firmly behind the outreach activities that every Church undertakes. It is certainly encouraging that so many here in this Church are solidly behind our outreach projects – such as the new Toddler Group or working towards Christ Church becoming an Eco-Church or Together on Thursdays or KFH Youth Group or seeking to support a refugee family or whatever. And that’s not to forget those who are also totally involved in other aspects of our life, particularly those which, by their very nature, are inevitably more hidden or perhaps taken for granted, but which are, nevertheless, absolutely vital to our life and health.

As a Church Council we have just updated our Mission Action Plan – our MAP – which is a guide to lead us in the year ahead. We have looked back over 2019 and recorded our achievements – and we have looked ahead to what 2020 will bring. Have a look at our updated MAP on the website – or there are some copies in the cross aisle. It is not perfect and there will be some gaps and omissions but it gives us a starting guide to lead us together in hopefully the right direction as a Church.

So then – as Christians we all need to get out of the box; we need to be bravely engaged in the messy, hard work of caring, challenging unfairness and injustice, and offering practical help and support to those around us. Only then will our praise

mean something and our worship can truly glorify God. We can study religion, we can read the Bible, we can say our prayers – but it is really only as we live and use our faith that we really come to experience and know God. For above everything, religion has to be used and experienced – as illustrated by this apocryphal story. You’ve probably heard it before but it’s worth hearing again:

“A bishop and a soapmaker went for a walk together. The soapmaker said ‘What good is religion? Look at the trouble and misery in the world after thousands of years of religion. If religion is true, why should this be?’ The bishop said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child, filthy with mud and grime, playing in the street. The bishop said ‘Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean. We’ve had soap for generations; yet look how dirty that child is. Of what value is soap?’ The soapmaker protested ‘But bishop, soap can’t do any good unless it is used’. ‘Exactly’ said the bishop”.

“Eternal God, whose Son went among the crowds and brought healing with his touch: help us to show his love, in your Church as we gather together, and by our lives as they are transformed into the Image of Christ our Lord. Amen.”