

Sermon from Wednesday 3 February 2021

Rev Wendy Sellers

Reading Luke 2. 22-40

On Saturday I had a surprise package arrive. It was some very nice handmade chocolates from Bishop Alan. His note started "This small Candlemas gift comes with my gratitude and that of my senior colleagues for your faithful ministry in these difficult times".

Isn't that lovely? I've never had a Candlemas present before, and probably I'll never get another one. It's hardly Christmas is it? Indeed, for most people it's one of those words - Candlemas - that you hear but you don't necessarily know what it means.

The church is very keen on specialist vocabulary, and for that reason when we get to Lent each Thought For the Day will tackle a tricky word or phrase to try to de-mystify the language we use, but Candlemas won't one of our chosen words.

Candlemas was actually yesterday, 2 Feb, and takes place 40 days after Christmas Day. It's the official end of the Christmas season. I had a friend who once kept his Christmas tree up until Candlemas. It wasn't a great success because it was a bit desiccated by then, but he was making a point about needing to celebrate the whole Christmas season.

So, what are we celebrating at Candlemas? The event is described in today's Gospel reading. In New Testament times women and their new-born babies were expected to stay at home for 40 days, before presenting the child at the temple. At this point the mother would be purified, a tradition that continued into Christianity as 'churching' but luckily without sacrificing the doves or pigeons. While this seems old fashioned, there's actually a lot to be said for staying home after the birth of a baby - the 40 days gave both mother and child a chance to recover from the birth, to establish feeding and to bond with one another. The tradition of churching continued well into the 20th century, largely as a thanksgiving for the safe delivery of both child and mother. Indeed, it is still part of our liturgy through the Book of Common Prayer.

In the reading, when the Holy family get to the temple, their visit takes an unexpected twist with first Simeon then Anna recognising the baby Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah: the light for revelation to the gentiles.

The day when we remember those two elders of the temple blessing the child came to be called Candlemas, because it became traditional on that day to bless the candles which would light up a church for the year.

Today we are not going to bless candles, but stones and palm crosses, which we hope might bring light into people's lives. Each stone has been marked with a cross in an ash mixture, for which I hold the secret recipe and a palm cross.

The two items are then going to be placed in an envelope with a leaflet giving a short reading, reflection and prayer for each week of Lent. Envelopes can be collected from either of our churches and will be delivered to our home mailing list or on request, so

please contact us if you would like one delivered and don't normally receive our postal mailouts, or indeed if you can think of someone who might like one. Envelopes posted by mail will need you to add your own stone!

The stone with ash will mark the start of Lent (Ash Wednesday) and the palm cross the end, (Palm Sunday). Additional palm crosses will be available in time for Palm Sunday of course.

The enclosed leaflet suggests a reflection a week around the stone, cross or a household object, and it will not surprise you that on one of the weeks you are asked to find a candle, or even a light bulb, to represent the light of Christ.

As we bless these stones and crosses, let us think of those who will receive them. Those who will pick up an envelope while visiting one of our churches, or receive them in the post. Those who need to feel the warmth of Christ's light in their lives.

So, let's pray:

Jesus, light of the world, bless these stones marked in ash and these crosses of palm. May we use them throughout Lent as an aid to prayer and reflection. May they spread your Word and your light to people in our wider community. Bless each person who receives one of these stones or palm crosses.

Amen.

While we are blessing things, I'd also like to bless the goodie bags which are going to all the staff in our two church schools – Hertford St Andrew's and Hertingfordbury Cowper- paid for by the kindness of members of our congregations.

Let us pray:

Lord God, please bless these gifts for the staff of our schools. May they bring joy and a feeling of appreciation. Bless each one of those staff members with the knowlege they are held in our prayers and your love.

Amen.