

Candlemas A / 2 February 2014 ✠ St John the Evangelist, Oxford
Malachi 3.1-5 / Psalm 24.1-2, 7-10 / Hebrews 2.14-18 / Luke 2.22-40

They offered a sacrifice to the Lord, according to the Law of Moses.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen.

2 February, 1662. (Lord's Day.) To church in the morning, and then home and dined with my wife, and so both of us to church again, where we had an Oxford man give us a most impertinent sermon upon "Cast your bread upon the waters, &c. So home to read, supper, and to prayers, and then to bed.

Samuel Pepys thoughtfully forbears to mention his preacher by name or even by college, a favour for which our unfortunate clerical and fellow-Oxonian predecessor may give thanks. One can well imagine the centuries of vexation that might ensue for this man and his descendants, on the basis of one offhand dismissal by a particularly voluble critic. Pepys's discretion provides us with both a model for us to emulate, and a reminder that on any given Sunday we may find ourselves preaching to a congregation that includes a notorious diarist, someone whose opinion of our homily is about to be recorded for all future generations to read.

Pepys doesn't record the *basis* of his dissatisfaction, but perhaps his experience with the Navy dissuaded him from nautical investments.

His diaries demonstrate him to hew closely to reason and practicality, so perhaps the impertinent preacher offended by proclaiming an unduly mystical devotion. Or since Pepys served loyally under Kings Charles II and James II, and was himself persistently suspected of papistical leanings, Pepys may have objected to the Oxford man's choice to preach a stewardship sermon from Ecclesiastes rather than to address the day of Candlemas, the very Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the most solemn Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. He could just be showing the jealous rivalry of a man who studied for his degree... *elsewhere*. Pepys himself gives us no reason for his charge of impertinence, but my best guess is that the Oxford preacher was too abstract, too high-flying, too remote from the concerns of daily commerce and politics, to impress the practical Pepys (who often enough begins his diaries of Sunday with "To the office," by which he did *not* mean our daily round of prayer).

At its best, a concern to expound the holier senses of Scripture, and of the Church's traditions and teachings, should indeed serve the most practical of interests. Candlemas catalyses a treasure-chest of mystical significance, from the triple holiness of the day itself to our practice of blessing candles at this Mass, to some of the theological conundrums of the Gospel text we proclaim this morning — but we neglect our calling if we expound these mysteries in service of demonstrating our own cleverness. The truth that we proclaim from rooftops, the mysteries we revere in ritual action, the light we praise and that we reflect, the light that we raise aloft to illumine the world, all orient us to the utterly practical purposes of our Saviour — or they become self-indulgent, the *opposite* of the mission to which we are called.

For instance, the faithful have for ages wondered why Our Lady, herself free from all sin of thought or word or action, should *require*

purification; they have pondered why our Lord, who was himself the Saviour, should be circumcised according to the covenant with Abraham, and why he who *is Holiness* should (as a firstborn) have to be *designated* holy according to the Law of Moses. These topics the saints and doctors explain to us, with extensive quotations from the Bible and from one another: Although it be true that Mary and Jesus were not subject to the need for purification or sealing in God's covenant, nonetheless *for our sake*, for the sake of our humanity, they upheld the Law. "Therefore [our Lord] had to become like his brothers and sisters in *every respect*, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." If there be among us any possible Pepys who considers such considerations extravagant, beside the point, *unnecessary* to practical Christians, then he or she should recall how often our neighbours in the city and the world (and sometimes, alas, how we ourselves) think so highly of ourselves that we consider ourselves exempt from the just requirements of our positions, or of our course programmes, or of our duties to our penniless brother who greets us at the corner of James Street and the Cowley Road. Jesus the Redeemer is redeemed at the Temple as a sign of the humanity he shares with us. Mary, full of grace, offers a sacrifice for purification — she who exemplifies all that is most pure in our humanity — by her example encourages us to honour her by practicing her generosity. She, most noble of mothers, makes the turtle-dove offering of the most humble, in solidarity with the most desperate.

And what of the blessing of candles today? St Vincent Ferrer proposes that we lift these up "as a sign of... three things which are in Christ. The soft wax signifies the flesh of Christ, which has vulnerability, which has been liquefied in the passion. The white wick

signifies the most pure soul of Christ. The flame, however, signifies the immense divinity of Christ. It is not sufficient just to see the light on the altar, nor Christ through faith, but to receive him in our hands through good works” (*De purificatione Beate Mariae*). The ritual action of blessing and holding candles impresses on us sensuously — if we be willing to see, to hear, to feel, and to remember and assent — these candles signify to us the *practical* importance of letting our light so shine before all people that they may see our good works, and give glory to God.

Now all this may seem more to give credence to our hypothetical Pepysian charge of impertinence than to exculpate this preacher on charges of improbable medieval fancies, fancies discordant with the simple verities and the lambent purity of Scripture’s narration of this moment. Even here, though, we may fairly point out that St Luke himself is the one who hands down to us the scene in which Gabriel greeted Mary as full of grace, blessed among women. St Luke invokes the story of Jesus’s first preaching at Nazareth, where a mob from his own home town finds his homily intolerably *impertinent*. And that impertinent sermon takes as its theme Isaiah’s prophecy of making known salvation to the poor, the blind, the imprisoned — and not simply in theory, but practically, in actual work on behalf of suffering men and women, to bring them liberty. Or as St Luke tells us that Mary sang of God’s work, “to put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalt those of low degree; to fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich empty away,” the Letter to the Hebrews adding “to free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” St Vincent, St Thomas, St Bede, Blessed John Henry Newman, the expositors whose sermons on the Feast of the Purification flow together in the background of the first bit of *this* very sermon, all may have opened their minds to mystical pathways through the Gospel — but they spotted

those mystical pathways by painstakingly close study of Scripture: word by word, nuance by nuance, allusion by echo by resonance by unexpected convergence in exquisite celestial harmony.

This is, after all, a day for illumination; this is a day dedicated to the premise that prophets can tell forth truths in more than merely the literal and obvious sense of what they say, to the premise that simple obedience to what righteousness requires can reveal the identity of the Saviour even in the presence of a month-old baby. This is a day on which we honour St Simeon and St Anna, cause enough for liturgical celebration; yet we further honour the Blessed Virgin, the Godbearer, amplifying our praise and gratitude; and above all today we observe a feast of the Lord, the introduction of the Prince of Peace into his Father's house. Filled with the Spirit who spoke through Simeon and Anna, commit our hearts and voices, our minds and our labours, our vocations and our eternal destinies to the proclamation that the King of Glory has arrived among us. Now, with Simeon, we can thank God for our salvation and depart in peace; now, with Mary, we can endure the pierced heart of sorrow; now, when we hear the uncomprehending query "Who is this King of Glory?" we *will* answer it with chanted psalm and splendid hymn, but even more so with dedicated, unwavering, *transformed* lives, look to this congregation, this House, this Church, and behold in us all the King of Glory!

At the risk, then, of the charge of impertinence, we make our sacrifice beside Mary, with Simeon bearing Jesus in our hands, praising God with Anna and perhaps even Samuel Pepys —

And so home to read, supper, and to prayers, and then to bed.

AMEN