

Candlemas evening
St Thomas, Salisbury

Haggai 2.1-9
John 2.18-22

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

John Henry Newman, who had been a Church of England priest and a leading figure in the Anglo-Catholic revival, and who had converted to Roman Catholicism only a few years earlier, wrote this rather extraordinary poem entitled *Candlemas*:

The Angel-lights of Christmas morn,
Which shot across the sky,
Away they pass at Candlemas,
They sparkle and they die.

Comfort of earth is brief at best,
Although it be divine;
Like funeral lights for Christmas gone,
Old Simeon's tapers shine.

And then for eight long weeks and more
We wait in twilight grey,
Till the high candle sheds a beam
On Holy Saturday.

We wait along the penance-tide
Of solemn fast and prayer;
While song is hush'd, and lights grow dim
In the sin-laden air.

And while the sword in Mary's soul
Is driven home, we hide
In our own hearts, and count the wounds
Of passion and of pride.

And still, though Candlemas be spent
And Alleluias o'er,
Mary is music in our need,
And Jesus light in store.

Until the reforms of the 1960s the season of penitence effectively began on Septuagesima Sunday rather than Ash Wednesday, which explains why Newman talks about 'eight long weeks' rather than the six we now associate with Lent, but the poem is no less effective for the reforms of the liturgy and Septuagesima Sunday is only two weeks away.

Since Christmas I have been gently preaching a sort of sermon series, though it doesn't matter at all if you haven't heard the others! On Boxing Day we reflected that when we look at the baby in the manger we see our own beginning as well, just as in every Christian death we can trace the death of Christ towards which every hour of the Christians life is lived. On the Feast of the Baptism of Christ we recognised that the baptismal water is both the womb of the Christian, and the tomb in which our old life is buried as we rise with Christ at Easter.

And here, tonight, on the last day of Christmas, we find another reminder that everything is connected, and that everything points to Easter. The candles that we will shortly light and carry in procession are, as Newman says, "like funeral lights for Christmas gone", and yet at the same time they are harbingers, murmurs in the darkness, speaking prophecy of "the high candle" that will shed "a beam on Holy Saturday." He is of

course referring to the Paschal Candle that will be kindled here in the darkness as Lent becomes Easter and we find that all of our fears and forebodings are swallowed up and transfigured in resurrection light.

One lovely tradition that adds just another layer to this ancient practice of blessing and carrying candles on this feast day is this: In the mediaeval period, at Easter the new light would have been genuinely new: struck from flint to create the spark that lights Paschal candle. And then that light would have been kept burning, in a perpetually refilled oil lamp, in the vestry of each church through all the long weeks and months until now. And so the candles that are kindled on Candlemas Day were lit from last year's Easter spark. The funeral lights for Christmas *are* the light of Easter.

Guerric of Igny, Cistercian monk of the 12th century, offers a wonderful image to assist us as we join in procession in just a moment or two. For the candle we bear, he says, is a symbol of the Christ we worship, just as much as the statue in the crib, or the altar around which we will continue to gather as Christmastide becomes Lent and "songs are hushed and lights grow dim in the sin laden air." He sees in the candle passed to the individual worshipper a parallel with the baby being passed back from old Simeon to his mother. He says this: "Simeon: hold God's loving-kindness tight to your breast and your grey hairs shall be blessed with love and kindness. Close to my heart, it is written, shall he lodge, and even when I give him back to his mother he shall remain with me. And when he is snuggled close to his mother's heart he shall nonetheless linger close to mine."

We bear our candles because we hope to bear Christ. Lights are kindled now, which already sparkle with Easter light, and as the

year turns, and we remember where we begin, we step forward through the gloom of the next 'eight long weeks and more', knowing that there is a 'high candle' waiting for us in the darkness.

The Angel-lights of Christmas morn,
Which shot across the sky,
Away they pass at Candlemas,
They sparkle and they die.

Comfort of earth is brief at best,
Although it be divine;
Like funeral lights for Christmas gone,
Old Simeon's tapers shine.

And then for eight long weeks and more
We wait in twilight grey,
Till the high candle sheds a beam
On Holy Saturday.

We wait along the penance-tide
Of solemn fast and prayer;
While song is hush'd, and lights grow dim
In the sin-laden air.

And while the sword in Mary's soul
Is driven home, we hide
In our own hearts, and count the wounds
Of passion and of pride.

And still, though Candlemas be spent
And Alleluias o'er,
Mary is music in our need,
And Jesus light in store.