

2nd February 2025, Year C, Candlemas

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Luke 2:22-40

Sermon

Candlemas, which always falls on February the 2nd, is a really strange day in the Christian Church calendar. In earlier centuries it was once a huge feast day in the Church – not quite as big as Christmas and Easter but certainly one of the most important days of the year.

But why was it so important? Well, it might be because on this day, and the days surrounding it, many different festivals and celebrations overlap – not only Christian festivals but also much older festivals from the bronze and even stone age that celebrate the return of the light of the sun, the beginning of spring, and the birth of new lambs in the fields.

For example, February 2nd is just about halfway from the winter solstice to the spring equinox. The Earth has gone one eighth of the way around the Sun. The Celtic peoples called this Imbolc, meaning 'in the belly' – referring to all the sheep having their lambs, and they celebrated with bonfires and blessings of hearth and home and started their spring cleaning to make everything ready for the new year.

So, this is the day when peoples of old, who lived much closer to the land than we do, celebrated the beginning of spring. And there are lots of old wives' tales about the weather on this day as well. Have you heard this rhyme?

If Candlemas Day be fair and bright, Winter will have another bite.

If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain, Winter will certainly not come again.

It comes from the story of the divine hag called the Cailleach who legend says created the rugged landscape of Scotland. Traditionally it was at Imbolc that the Cailleach collected firewood for the rest of the winter if bad weather was still to come, and so she would make the weather on this day clear and bright if she needed to go out collecting.

In other words, if it's cloudy and drizzly on Candlemas day, it's time to celebrate, because the worst of winter is over! And if there's one thing we can always guarantee in Glasgow – it's going to be cloudy and wet – hurrah! Winter is over. It's official. The Cailleach has spoken.

Christians of course have always made use of these earlier festivals, and so it's no surprise that when Jesus is taken to the temple by his mother and father to give thanks to God for his birth, and old Simeon describes him as a light to the world, Christians decided that this day must be the perfect day to celebrate the new light of Christ alongside the returning light of spring.

This is after all, also the fortieth day of Christmas. If Christmas is day 1, then today is day 40, and according to the law of Moses, this was the date when newborn males were supposed to be presented at the temple. So, whichever way you look at it, February 2nd is *the* day for a festival of light.

And so the early Christians invented Candlemas, when traditionally all the candles in churches and in homes would be blessed for the coming year.

The story doesn't end there though. In the middle of the sixth century, a massive volcano erupted and blotted out the sun for about four years, and harvests failed in what was left of the Roman empire because of the lack of light and the cold. So they brought grain from abroad on ships, and with the grain came rats, and with the rats came a terrible plague, the forerunner of the Black Death, and at least a quarter of the known world died from it. At its peak around 10,000 people a day were dying in the imperial capital of Constantinople. They called it

the plague of Justinian, because he was the emperor at the time, though I doubt he was terribly pleased at having his name attached to it.

The situation was so bad that the emperor ordered everyone to go to church every day to pray for the plague to end – even the emperor himself was on his knees – and while that was going on, Justinian was also ordering his citizens to pay the taxes of their dead neighbours so he could fight wars against the Vandals. These were desperate, desperate times.

Eventually, after about four years, the skies over the Mediterranean began to clear, the light and warmth returned, the harvests improved, the rats no longer came on the grain ships, and the plague ended. Christians celebrated by turning the feast day of Candlemas into one of the biggest celebrations of the year. What better day to give thanks for the return of sunlight after four years of semi-darkness, and the ending of a plague, than by celebrating the presentation of baby Jesus in the Temple – the saviour of the world and the light of all peoples.

This is why Candlemas day is so important. It was important to the people who made the stone circles – they often arranged their stones to greet the sunrise on this day – and it was important to the early Christians, and important to many peoples even today, although we've forgotten a lot of these things, since we aren't so dependent on our connection with the land and the seasons. But we do still look at the small white snowdrops and the green stems of the beginning of daffodils, and we smile a little because there's an hour more light in the evenings and we know that spring will soon be arriving, and perhaps it reminds us that God is always arriving at his temple, which is each of our beautiful hearts.

So, I'd like to suggest we think of Candlemas as God's faithfulness and love coming to life again in us, the brightening light pushing away the darkness of winter, pushing back the darkness of all the difficult and traumatic times we are each living through. Candlemas is the first reminder, as Lent approaches, that after every Good Friday comes an Easter Sunday.

Nearly two thousand Easters have passed and still we persevere in seeking God and following Christ. Two thousand springs, summers, autumns and winters. Churches built and churches fallen into ruin and churches restored. Festivals and traditions established, flourishing but then forgotten, then repurposed and recreated. The dance of God's life continues in us, and the thread through it all is faithful, hopeful, persevering love. Love never gives up, and neither shall we.

Candlemas – Malcolm Guite

They came, as called, according to the Law.
Though they were poor and had to keep things simple,
They moved in grace, in quietness, in awe,
For God was coming with them to His temple.
Amidst the outer court's commercial bustle
They'd waited hours, enduring shouts and shoves,
Buyers and sellers, sensing one more hustle,
Had made a killing on the two young doves.
They come at last with us to Candlemas
And keep the day the prophecies came true
We glimpse with them, amidst our busyness,
The peace that Simeon and Anna knew.
For Candlemas still keeps His kindled light,
Against the dark our Saviour's face is bright.