

Love in the age of Trump – a sermon for Candlemas

If you're in touch with other Christian churches or communities, or if you listen to radio broadcasts of Christian services, then you may realise that most churches celebrated Candlemas last Sunday. We decided to celebrate it on the closest Sunday to the Feast itself, which fell on Thursday, and was a particularly special day in the life of our Diocese as it marked the last public event of Richard Chartres, who is retiring after nearly 22 years as Bishop of London. We wish him well.

A simultaneous pop-up cathedral was staged in Paternoster Square, where all the clergy gathered before the service began to watch the Bishop send his first ever tweet, declaring that 'Jesus Christ is the Light of the World!', and encouraging all those present to do the same. It would have been great if that message of light and hope had gone viral, but I fear the world of social media is still far too caught up in the never ending Twitter storm surrounding the new President of the USA, which certainly seems to generate way more heat than light.

Tempting as it is to try and make sermons a Trump-free zone, that also seems somewhat of a cop-out, especially as when I sat down at my desk to write this sermon yesterday I was immediately distracted by the long, noisy sea of protesters streaming along Piccadilly and right past our gates for over 20 minutes, protesting the travel ban - which was signed, suspended, reinstated, overturned, appealed and most recently this morning 'appeal denied' in a protracted game of legal and constitutional ping-pong. The travel ban affects those trying to enter the USA from 7 predominantly Muslim countries and is perceived by many as discrimination against our Muslim brothers and sisters.

For a while I went outside to watch and take photos. As with the Women's March the day after the Inauguration, I was struck by how good natured the march was, despite the passion of those protesting. There were people of all ages, and from the banners it was clear that there were Christians, Muslims and Jews all marching. As I came back into the building, one of our vergers wondered out loud if these demonstrations are going to become a weekly event.

I found myself reflecting on the irony that the result of this most controversial Presidential Executive Order which so many consider to be deeply divisive has been to bring so many people together in cities around the world. And not just cities. On Friday I visited my parents who live in Hampshire and read in the local paper that on Monday, there had been a 50-people strong protest in the town square, including a Syrian refugee family housed locally by the Rural Refugee Network. My parents have lived there since I was 3 weeks old and I can't remember ever reading or hearing of a political protest in the town square before.

If you follow our Twitter feed here at St James's (@StJPiccadilly), you will have seen not just the proclamation tweeted from Paternoster Square on Thursday, the same message we also celebrate today, that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, but also earlier in the week a photo from the Chicago Tribune, captured by a staff photographer covering the protests at O'Hare International Airport. It is an image so powerful and so hopeful that it quickly went viral. It shows two fathers in the protest, so alike they could be brothers, both with children on their shoulders – a son and a daughter. The fathers are chatting to one another and smiling as are the children above them. One family is Jewish and the other

Muslim. Both fathers and children carry signs. The 9 year-old Jewish boy's sign reads: "Hate has no home here" and the 7 year-old Muslim girl's sign reads: "Love. Love."



Soon after the Huffington Post ran an article telling the story behind the photo, that the two families met at the protest and simply hit it off on the spot. The Jewish father, Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell said they had "a lovely conversation" with Fatih Yildirim, who in the moment the photo was taken was asking him "where to find a kosher steakhouse". The two families exchanged contact details and the rabbi and his family invited their new Muslim friends for Shabbat dinner. "I'm making steak, he is bringing baklava." Of the viral image, the rabbi says, "We are happy if this photograph can bring a bit more love and light into this world."¹

Love and light are at the heart of Candlemas, this Feast of the Presentation. This beautiful story brings together a small cast of two sets of characters, meeting for the first time, not in a busy international airport, but in a busy temple. It's so easy to hear this story and imagine a reverential silence filling the temple as Mary and Joseph bring their baby son to fulfil their religious duties, but the clues are there that tell us otherwise. They need to bring two turtle doves or the budget option of two pigeons. This ritual involves sacrifice, as do so many of the hundreds

of thank-offerings and sin-offerings which take place daily in the temple.

Candlemas marks the end of Epiphany, if you like, the final act in our Christmas story. Today is the last day our nativity figures will be in our midst until Advent. Since observing the visit of the magi, we've considered in recent weeks the other ways in which Christ's identity as God's Chosen One is manifest – at his Baptism, the calling of his first disciples and his first miracle. These last three happened was Jesus was an adult, but in today's Gospel, he is an infant, a 40-day old baby.

Mary and Joseph enter the Temple, to dedicate their child to God, but Luke tells us not about the Presentation itself, but rather what happens beforehand. Enter first Simeon, and then Anna, two holy people known for their faith and righteousness; two people who have stayed true to God and God's promises when many others would have fallen away or simply given up. We're told that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon, a quality which definitely sets him apart, although unlike Anna, he is not always in the temple. But clearly it's the Holy Spirit who prompts him to enter the temple as Mary and Joseph arrive with Jesus. And again, it is though the Holy Spirit that in the midst of the crowds, the moneychangers, the noise, the smells, the priests sacrificing animals and the general hullabaloo and assault on the senses of the first century Temple, that he recognises the baby in Mary's arms as God's chosen Messiah.

We're not told of Mary's reaction when he takes the child from her, but Luke does comment that both Mary and Joseph are amazed at Simeon's prayer when he praises God for letting him see (and hold) God's chosen one, in whom is the light and the glory of God. It's a very intimate moment. We're told the shepherds knelt to adore, but Simeon takes the child in his arms, cradles him and no doubt looks into his eyes;

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-beautiful-story-behind-this-viral-photo-from-a-chicago-airport-protest_us_5890bf14e4b02772c4e97878

stares smiling into the face of God and gives thanks.

We should bear in mind that it's most likely the Presentation took place before the visit of the magi, so Simeon's next words, are for Mary and Joseph the first indication of the complex and challenging future and the trials that lie ahead. And then, while Mary is still digesting the prophecy that a sword will pierce her soul, along comes the elderly prophetess, Anna, a constant presence in the temple. She too praises God for the gift of Mary and Joseph's child, but whereas Simeon's words were spoken more privately, to God and to the parents, Anna speaks to all who will listen.

It's a powerful story, so much so that Luke doesn't relate the Presentation itself, but tells us simply "When they had finished everything required of them by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth".

It's a pair of encounters that many in the temple wouldn't have noticed, and no doubt even those who heard Anna's excitement may not have paid much attention. But in the midst of the bustling temple, Luke portrays a meeting of many opposites – of elderly and infant, of birth and death, of good news and bad, of prophecy and fulfilment, of male and female, of divine and earthly, of darkness and light, of hope and fear.

Candlemas is a holy axis, and marks the moment of transition from the cradle to the cross. We take a last look back at Christmas before setting our faces to Jerusalem, to our observance of Lent and Holy Week. It's a festival which encompasses both light and dark. Traditionally, here in the West, it was at Candlemas, the darkest time of the year, that the church would bless all the candles that would be used in the year ahead. It doesn't happen today, but in Thursday's service at the cathedral, the lights were dimmed as we all lit candles which the Bishop blessed and for the first half of his farewell service, the full cathedral of St Paul's by candle light was stunningly beautiful. Tonight, in our Creative Spirit service, we'll be decorating and blessing candles to take home. At the end of the service, we'll process to

the font, as we once more proclaim Jesus as the Light of the World before extinguishing our candles as we prepare to embark on our Lenten journey.

Which brings me back to social media. One of the ways we will be marking Lent this year is by joining in the '40 Acts' challenge - an initiative run largely on social media in which we commit to undertaking 40 acts of generosity, one on each day of Lent. We'll be explaining more about it in the coming weeks, but I encourage those of you who use Twitter to explore #40acts and for those of you with internet access to Google it.

Regardless of your political affiliations, as Christians, our mandate is to practice both generosity and hospitality, to heal division and spread love and light in our broken and fractured world. There were a number of very striking banner slogans in recent marches, but I found myself wondering what might best represent the Christian viewpoint this Candlemas. Perhaps, from Mechthild of Magdeburg, medieval Christian mystic: "How should one live? Live welcoming all." Or from Jim Willis of the Sojourners Community: "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence – and watching the evidence change." Or from George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community: "Follow the light you have and pray for more light."

But I close not with a slogan, but with a prayer for Candlemas, by Anne Lewin. It is very much a Christian prayer about a Christian festival, but for me, it also deeply resonates with the photo of the two families at the airport and their shared desire to "bring a bit more love and light into this world."

Candlemas Prayer

I left my candle burning. Lit from light
Borrowed from another, it stood there
witness to Christ, Light of the World;
Prayer that Light would overcome darkness.
As I left, another lit a candle from my light,
Dispelling gloom with added strength.
Who knows how many joined their light to those,
Or drew fresh courage from their company;

Who knows how many took a step, drawn by the
Light of Christ from darkness to new life?

Lord Christ, set me on fire.
Burn from me all that dims your light,

Kindle an answering flame in lives around;
That darkness may be driven back,
And glory stream into this world,
Transforming it with love.
Amen.