

The Archbishop of York, the Right Reverend Stephen Cottrell, preaches & presides at an act of worship for the Feast of Candlemas, livestreamed from York Minster on Sunday 31st January at 4pm.

You can join York Minster's Candlemas Service:

Documents

- [A LITURGY FOR CANDLEMAS \(246.64 KB\)](#)

The sermon can be read in full:

Taking the child in his arms, Simeon praised God, saying: *"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles."* (Luke 2. 28; 30-32)

The story of Christ's presentation in the Temple is a story about *recognition* and *purpose*.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon recognises the infant Jesus as the Messiah, and in this sense the purpose of his life is fulfilled: it was promised that he would see the Messiah of God before he died.

But it happens to him in a way that he could not have foreseen: God's purposes are also revealed for all the world. And in an uncomfortably surprising way: a vulnerable child, a baby.

And to Simeon's surprise, the nature and direction of this purpose takes him beyond himself; the purpose of God that he sees in Jesus is one that not only crosses boundaries, but re-draws them. This child isn't just a light to Israel, but to the Gentiles - that is, to everyone.

It is hard for us to realise how dramatic these words were and how surprising when they were first spoken. The light that shines in Christ, is now promised to all humanity.

God always stretches and surprises us. God is more generous than us. More accepting.

Christ is the light of the world. That means for everyone and everything, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, or whether we accept it or not.

Christ is the light that is always available us and his forgiveness and acceptance are ours whether we ask for them or not.

If we choose not to see this light, then the darkness we dwell in is of our own making. It is the shadow we create by turning our back on God's free gift of light in Christ. As St John puts it: people prefer darkness to light (John 3.19)

All this has never fitted easily with the religious mind that likes to keep a careful tally of who's in and who's out and is constantly drawing boundaries and posting sentries. Therefore, this child – this gospel - will also be a sign opposed. Opposed, so often by the respectable and the religious, and accepted by those who know their need of God. And in people's acceptance - or in their opposition - the inner thoughts and the inner motives are revealed. Therefore, a further recognition and a further purpose are declared: a sword will pierce Mary's heart as it will to all who try and be faithful to the scandalous hospitality of God.

The Christian gospel crosses boundaries and redraws the human map so everyone is counted in. Yes, you can still choose to count yourself out, but that is your choice, not God's.

Yes, he does still want you to live a just and righteous life, but this is also your choice and, in Christ, perfect humanity, and a complete understanding of humanity and unconditioned forgiveness, are all on offer.

I long for us to be a Church that reveals and reflects this gospel.

I long for us to be a Church that can hold together different views on issues that could so easily divide us - not because there is some strange Anglican virtue in creating compromise, but because the gospel that crosses boundaries demands it.

We must keep faith with each other, especially those with whom we disagree.

For myself, I can do no other, because God in Christ has kept such faith in me. While I was still a sinner, he died for me.

Well, that's the end of the sermon. Only when I'd finished preparing it, I looked back at it and thought, rather morosely, that this sermon could have been preached at Candlemas any year and that the things I'm saying are true for every year. There's nothing wrong with this, but it niggled a bit. It niggled a bit because there is one line in the story that kept popping into my head. It is this: Luke 2. 28 Simeon took him in his arms. Simeon picked up and held and embraced the child, Jesus.

That's what we can't do at the moment, and it hurts. We can't touch each other. We can't hold each other. We can't really see each other's faces. It's made being with each other and showing love to each other so hard.

The one thing we can do for those we love, is pray. Prayer is an expression of love, because prayer is what God does in us through the Spirit, uniting us in Christ, the light of the world, to the light and goodness and belonging that we have in God. When we pray we hold ourselves and hold those we love into the very hands and embrace of God, just like Simeon holding Jesus.

This week we again invite the Church to pray, especially at 6pm each evening. To pray for our nation. To pray for our Health Service, to pray for those we love, and because of what Candlemas means also to pray for those we can't love, and for those with whom we disagree and for those who have hurt us.

In these people God's purposes are revealed. In community with them, as well as with those we like and love, God will show us what community is really like. Even if it hurts us, piercing our hearts as we learn how to share Christ's light with everyone. Amen

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