

On Monday last week I led the funeral of a wonderful woman I knew from South Kilburn. Monday was a wonderful celebration of her 94 years which she had lived all of within a half mile from Kilburn Park station. She was a great story teller – especially about the history of Kilburn and how things have changed since the 1920's. She had several passions in her life, including baking and her family – but her greatest source of entertainment was bingo! Even up until December past she might play 5 days a week at a Bingo hall in Cricklewood. Now as surprising as it might sound, I have only played bingo a couple of times on a church camp – but I have never been to a British Bingo Hall. So on Monday after her funeral, her life celebration continued at Bingo. I didn't really know what to expect – but I wasn't prepared for the experience I was about to have.

As I arrived with another priest at the entrance – it was clear that no clergy had ever entered this place peacefully – and we were escorted carefully around the edge of the bingo hall so as to not upset regular patrons. I did have a little pang of panic that a photo of us entering might keep the daily mail in business for another week – as addressing concerns about gambling establishments is one of the Archbishop of Canterbury's priorities – but I was hoping the pastoral need to be with a grieving family would outweigh some of the hypocrisy I was feeling!

As we walked through to the 'noisy area' where her wake was to be held I was very overwhelmed – I have never seen anything like it – and I come from a country that boasts 1/3 of the world's poker (slot machines). There is seating for 2500 people to play bingo – everything was shining and glittery – it felt like a special and exciting place – flashing lights. There were hundreds of machines as well as all sorts of hospitality.

I am not sure what I expected – I knew it wasn't going to be like the old church hall in my country town where they sometimes played bingo – but I guess I was expecting more like a small function room rather than something that felt like it came out of a Las Vegas movie. It was easy to see how people could be drawn in, it was like another world – and definitely not like anything else in Kilburn or Cricklewood. It seemed like a place – or a space – between fantasy and reality; where people might dare to hope things could be different – but of course they very rarely are; which the danger is of course. Sometimes we search for hope in strange spaces.

For a woman, like Edith who we farewelled on Monday it had been a place where she was not alone – company and friendship to pass the time. But for many others it is an attempted escape from reality which doesn't work out!

The image and experience of it has stayed with me all week as I have been making my way through a long series of meetings; and considering how we come to celebrate Candlemas this coming week. The glamour of this place, in contrast to the grounded hopefulness which Edith always shared in her stories, despite all she had experience in her life.

Candlemas is one of those festivals that the rest of the world – and to be honest – most of the church does not understand. Since the beginning of January I have regularly responded to questions about why the crib is still in church and why I haven't cleaned up properly after Christmas. We don't cope well with traditions we don't understand. So a festival which marks the end of a forgotten season can be difficult. But despite this, I think Candlemas is one of the more important feasts of the year because it is about the living in between.

Candlemas marks the turn from the celebration of Christ incarnation – God coming amongst – and to facing the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection. It grounds in the foundations of our faith – and in the place we live – whatever distractions we might enjoy at different moments. The statement which we read at the start of today’s service states it well.

- We remember the birth of Jesus, and the promise that this act of God becoming human offers to the world.
- We consider the joy of his parents in bringing a new child to give thanks.
- We give thanks for all new beginnings in faith.
- Like Simeon and Anna, we remember times of longing and hope, and what it felt like when they were realised.
- We remember that God is faithful to God’s promises.

But the strongest image in the statement is its last sentence:

*Today, we celebrate both the joy of his coming and his searching judgement, looking back to the day of his birth and forward to the coming days of his passion.<sup>1</sup>*

Our faith in part is always held in this space, the reality of Christ incarnation – God becomes human, AND the reality of humanities brokenness which leads to Jesus death and the hope of the resurrection which is realised at the end of his passion.

In reality our faith is always lived in this space – the knowledge that God loves us and is with us; and the reality that we cannot always accept this. But while we live in this space, we need to ensure we are not trapped in this space – for the point of Candlemas is about facing us boldly towards living; not fearing or waiting or filling the space with distractions.

In the image of Jesus being lifted up by Simeon we have an image of hope – the past – those who longed for a messiah, those who longed for a more intimate experience of God, who longed for a different experience of humanity where justice and hope might reign. And the future – the child Jesus both human and divine, a helpless infant and yet the source of all hope and expectation that things would change.

It is a startling image, and one that many say is folly. But we believe it has potential – that God is giving us a sign and a space – not just for hope but for action! Sometimes we may feel that we hiding in the space between God and reality; but actually we are living in a space where God is our reality.

The prophet Malachi from whom we heard the first reading today, understands the patience and endurance which faith requires. Little is known about this prophet, however he is thought to be the last of the ‘traditional’ prophets before John the Baptist.

This book describes a time of restless waiting in the history of the people of Judah. The exile was over, the second temple had been built and worship there restored, but all was not as it had been envisioned. There was as yet no sign of the glory of God returning to fill the temple. In today’s passage the prophet responds with some sobering words. They had expected God’s blessing, but it is to come first through purification and pain (A refining fire). Malachi is attempting to help his community see that cleansing and change are possible, but there is a cost involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Common Worship 2011

One of the challenges of our modern world is that we expect everything now – we have no sense that things take time that we may not see things come to fruition. I think it is one of the reason that so many people struggle with the concept of faith – it is not complete, it is not instant, it takes work – and it is a mystery – it is not an absolute! But I think too sometimes we forget about the space that we are in, and that space is one that is not about hiding (though sometimes we might feel like it) – but about living.

For God, our lifetimes are but a second – change may take eternity, seasons change but God remains the same. But also in faith, nothing is instant, understanding and change take work and time and commitment – a refining fire. Anna and Simeon waited in the temple nearly there entire life time. We often expect God to respond to our prayers before we put Sunday lunch in the oven!

As we know, one of the moments we come to terms with being adult is that moment when we realise that every day of life is not fantastically exciting, most of life just is, and sadly we can't always fix everything. A friend of mine describes this as 'the sausages and mash approach'. None of us is likely to eat Christmas dinner every day – in fact it would be bad for us – most of the time our meals a routine – sausages and mash. Same with our lives, there are days of great chaos, days of disappointment and days of great achievements, but most days just are – and they are still good days, and God is with us!

The point is that God and Candlemas remind us of the great gift that life is. It is the space between God's divinity and humanity. It is that point of recognising our yearning, or giving thanks for what has happened, and then looking forward to what is to come. It reminds us that mostly we live our lives of faith, and that the changes we long for as individuals, church and as a world, will come – but it will take time – more than our life time probably.

In Malachi and in our gospel we are reminded that when our longing seems like it will not be fulfilled, we come to know that it will change - there is hope for we have faith in God! So often we look for signs in strange places; but mostly they come to us like Simeon – just to the place where we are

*Now, Lord, let your servant go in peace: for your word has been fulfilled.*

*My own eyes have seen your promise fulfilled.*

May this be our prayer too – that we too may see in our life time evidence of God's promised fulfilled in the stories that we tell and in the way that we live.

Amen