

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. 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 –to facing the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection. It grounds the foundations of our faith to the place we live. 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.¹

Our faith in part is always held in this space, the experience of Christ incarnation – God becoming human, AND the experience of humanities brokenness which leads to Jesus death and the hope of the resurrection

In many ways our faith is always lived in this space – the knowledge that God loves us and is with us; and the fact 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 boldly towards living; not fearing or waiting or filling the space with distractions.

Over the past few months I have been coming to terms with a great deal of information which today I am now able to share with you. (We have needed to wait for the URC Moderator and for the Bishop to confirm this can now be public). For us as a congregation the information I am about to share with you, will mean that for a while we are going to be living in a period of transition, in a sense we will be living in an in-between space. It will give us a real chance to put our faith into practice as we live in between one time and the coming of another.

Roughly a year ago, the Joint Council, which is a body made up of members of St Anne's and members of St Andrew's agreed that as we celebrated 20 years of our shared life together, we needed to consider what our next twenty years together

¹ Common Worship 2011

might look like. As a result of this, we went back to our congregations to talk.

St Andrew's have decided that they are entering a period of transition, and they are now at a stage where they are in the process of exploring possible closure. This is a big change for them, and for us, as all the relationships and most of the work in this building is based on the fact that we are an ecumenical partnership – two churches from different traditions working together. This is unlikely to continue.

It is from this basis of two churches working together that we find the foundations of our greatest shared work – that of course is the amazing work that has been achieved by London Inter Faith Centre – which most recently has been undertaken on our behalf by Fr Laurence and Rev John.

Both Fr Laurence and Rev John will retire in the next 12 months. Fr Laurence will leave us on the 31st March this year. Rev John will retire in the early Summer of 2020. Neither Laurence or John will be replaced either as parish priests or inter faith advisers for different reasons outside our control.

The Inter Faith Centre Trustee's met two weeks ago and are agreed that it will be unable to continue in its current form after December 2019. As neither denomination will Inter Faith staff based in this location; but mainly as this was an ecumenical project it could not continue if both parties were not present.

It will not be the end of the work however it will continue in many ways. In the Diocese, for the first time a full time Inter Faith Post has been established which is based between St Paul's Cathedral and Southall. They are also hoping that some of the programs that they will run will take place here.

Also, the wonderful relationships we have with our neighbours – Islamia, Al Khoe, Al Sadiq and Al Zahair, with North West Jewish Day School will continue. St Anne's will continue to work with and share in the work that has always been part of our story. We will still host events and opportunities for conversations.

In terms of St Anne's and St Andrew's we will also have change in the way that we are responsible for and manage the building.

Much of our who we are will look and feel different. While none of this will happen immediately, we have entered a period of transition which will take about 18 months to two years. To be honest we have no idea of the outcome and many of the decisions are wider than us as a congregation. The one thing I am certain of however is that the congregation of St Anne's will still be here, and I hope we will continue to engage with the community around us, including our Inter Faith and Ecumenical friends – and that God will continue to guide us in our ministry in this place.

This is still a great deal of change however, and for the most part it is change we have no control over, or can be sure where it will lead.

As I said last week- change and transition are not about forgetting – rather we are in

a time when we need to acknowledge and celebrated our shared history and all that has been achieved and will continue to be achieved; but also we need to be preparing for the changes that will come.

Some changes may give us great opportunities to try new things; others will feel sad as we farewell friends and mark the end of different parts of our shared journey.

At this point we do not know what the future holds; we do know that much change is upon us, and that in the coming months we have many farewell's to face. We will celebrate what has been achieved and acknowledge the work has been done – but we will also need to care for one another as we face changes which may feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

The prophet Malachi from whom we heard the first reading today, understood the patience and endurance which faith requires.

Malachi 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 still 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 it can be painful.

While there is a danger of drawing too many parallels, I think that we can learn much from the prophet, as he assists the community face the changes within their community. Malachi anticipates that the people will make crisscrossing responses to the coming of the Lord. The message that the prophet bears will inspire delight (Malachi 3:1a) as well as alarm (verse 2a)². The intersection of hope and despair resonates I suspect for many of us; I know in the past six months I have swung from hope at what God might be doing in this place, to despair at the amount of change we are facing and if we have the strength and capacity as a community to bear it.

Change may feel intense to us, but one of the gifts of Candlemas is that it reminds us that 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 takes work and time and commitment – a refining fire. Anna and Simeon waited in the temple nearly their entire life time. We will need their patience and their faith in the coming months, as we wait for decisions outside our control; as we look to working in our new reality, as we pray and listen for where God will be leading us.

The lifting of the Christ Child is a looking forward and a looking back – a time of transition. We enter our own transition now as a parish, we will look forward and we will look back – but like the Christ child, we need to have faith that will be held

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3911

Candlemas 3rd February 2019
Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

safely in God's hands in the light. Amen.