

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – The Epiphany**

**Zoom Service**

**7<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

*Christine Portman, Reader*

On these short winter days, at the darkest time of the year, we often crave the light, and if you think about many of the artistic depictions of the wise men, so often we're shown a night-time scene. The star shines from a midnight-blue sky as below, light beams forth from the crib. The glorious revelation takes place in darkness. This surprising baby comes into a dark world. The gospel reading ends with a reminder of that world: *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. A massacre of innocents will soon take place.*

The gifts that the Magi bring are, as Isaiah had prophesied, *gold* fit to crown a king and *frankincense*, whose perfume, as the carol puts it, *owns a deity nigh*: expensive gifts brought by wise men from distant lands. Wise because they recognise the significance of the star, because they see in the child such promise that it fills them with joy and they feel compelled to *fall down before him*. But they come with a third gift, equally costly – the precious perfume, myrrh, one of the ingredients of Jewish holy incense and anointing oil. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus would bring it to bind Jesus's body before he was laid in the tomb. Already, in the moment that Jesus is recognised as the light of the world, his death is foreshadowed.

We're especially and painfully aware at the moment of oppression and violence. Every day we see the massacre of innocents on our TV screens. Who can't be sickened by the depressing footage showing the consequences of war – lives utterly destroyed yet often cynically dismissed as 'collateral damage'. A non-believing friend said to me earlier this week, *'it's very hard to hold out much hope for the year ahead'*.

But that is precisely what we must do. Do we have any reason to believe things have ever been any different throughout human history? When we face the darkness of our humanity, that is when we most need to listen to the words that have come down to us over thousands of years. In dark times the eyes of faith see the light of God even more clearly. Isaiah looks not to his current circumstances, but to the fulfilment of God's promises in God's time. Foretelling the arrival of the Messiah, he knows the joy this will bring: *Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.* He is writing at a time of great suffering for his people, exiled in Babylon. But although their world may be dark, he sees and proclaims hope for humankind.

We may be sickened by the injustices of this world, by poverty, cruelty and indifference, but the psalmist promises that there will be a time when God's King will *deliver the poor that cry out, the needy and those who have no helper. He shall have pity on the weak and poor; he shall preserve the lives of the needy. He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, and dear shall their blood be in his sight.* And this is our faith: in the face of all that we know about our potential for evil, goodness will triumph.

Just before Christmas, I read an article by a professor from the London School of Economics. In the midst of such desperate news from around the world, she had begun to lose hope. But, she wrote: *Hope is the opposite of nihilism. Paradoxically, the worse the world goes, the more hopeful you must remain to be able to continue fighting. Being hopeful is not about guaranteeing the right outcome, but preserving the right principle: the principle based on which a moral world makes sense* (Lea Ypi).

Our faith is a resurrection faith. After the Crucifixion, when all hope should, on any reasonable grounds have been lost, and yet..... British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once famously said, *'Events, my dear boy, events'*. An extraordinary and inexplicable event would soon change everything!

Sometimes, through our words, our prayers and our actions, we're able to effect changes for good, but very often we can't and that's a hard lesson to learn. But our faith tells us that in fact that doesn't matter. We may feel, and sometimes actually be powerless to stop evil things from happening, but, thank God, it is not up to us to *guarantee the right outcome.* We did not create this universe, we did not send prophets to prophesy or a Messiah to be born. We did not engineer the Resurrection. Living at the time of the Black Death, the mystic Julian of Norwich could write, *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all*

*manner of thing shall be well. We may walk in darkness but we have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned (Isaiah 9.2). We live and trust in the Lord.*

Epiphany is defined as a moment of sudden and great revelation or realization. It comes from Koine Greek - ἐπιφάνεια *epipháneia* – the manifestation of a god to mortal eyes. For Christians it means something more specific: it represents the moment that our Lord was revealed to the Gentiles, all those living beyond the confines of the Jewish world. Our Saviour made known to all humanity. In his letter to the Colossians Paul says he has been given the grace *to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.* This revelation has continued down the generations for thousands of years to all of us who hear and believe. We are *sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel* and as such we, who have been given the grace to experience those *boundless riches*, are called also to be lights in the darkness.

In these dark days, may we pray always to be bearers of light and hope.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon - Second Sunday of Epiphany**

**All Saints' Marseille**

**14<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Nathanael sits serenely and confidently under his fig-tree, “for the Lord has spoken” (Micah 4.4): one day, the one “about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” will come. He is unstartled by Philip’s revelation that he has found the Messiah. Yet, scepticism lingers: can the Messiah emerge from the little-known, inconspicuous Nazareth? Should not the place of God’s coming be a town with more to commend itself than ordinary Nazareth?

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Surely not!

Much like Nathanael, our daily existence weaves a fabric of assumptions - about others, their thoughts, beliefs and behaviour. At times, we label situations as hopeless. There are also instances when we look at ourselves or at parts of our life and declare improvement as not possible. How can anything worthwhile come out of this? We may even set prerequisites that must be met before we believe God will intervene.

Whether articulated or silent, these assumptions act as restrictive veils, narrowing our vision and stifling the possibility of change and growth. They cast life into shallowness, impoverish our faith and assert there is no room for God to manifest and act. The belief that God could reveal himself in another person, a relationship or situation, or in our own life becomes a formidable challenge.

Nathanael’s fig tree refuge is no happenstance. It is a fig tree that provided leaves for Adam and Eve to hide behind from God and themselves. Later, Jesus, finding no fruit on a fig tree, will curse it for its lifelessness. Assumptions can

become futile hiding places. They are not fruitful. They prevent profound engagement with life, each other, and God.

Nathanael's preconceptions could have deprived him of encountering the Son of God, had it not been for Philip's invitation: "Come and see."

Philip doesn't want to prove who Jesus of Nazareth is, he doesn't want to persuade Nathanael to become one of Jesus' disciples. Philip simply says: Come and see. Dare to believe that maybe you have been wrong in your certainties about the other, about the world, about God. Leave the shelter of your fig tree and come to see for yourself.

God defies confinement within Nathanael's assumptions – or by ours. Beyond every assumption we make, there is a deeper truth to be discovered, a reservoir of unexplored life. The Nazareth of our assumptions can transform into the stage for God's manifestation, of God's epiphany - the experience of the central claim of John's Gospel that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). To accept the invitation to "come and see" means to embrace all of life with a grace-filled curiosity, acknowledging the mystery in each other, worthy of further exploration.

Nathanael didn't have to go with Philip; he could have held on to his assumptions and continued to hide under his fig tree. Yet Philip's simple words of invitation made a world of difference. Upon encountering Jesus, in one moment, Nathanael transcended his narrow notions to embrace the joy inherent in following Jesus. But what was it about this encounter that made Nathanael change so dramatically? It is that Jesus saw Nathanael.

Jesus turned his gaze on Nathanael and told him who he is. This gaze of Jesus was enough to change Nathanael's heart. He had come to see, a little sceptical; on arrival it was he who was seen, and that changed everything.

There must have been something powerful about that gaze of Jesus. More than once in the Gospels, it changed people's hearts. I believe that this reversal is at the heart of faith in Christ, whom we have never seen with our eyes. We want to see him, and one day we realise that he has seen us. We feel that we are known, that we are loved as we are. We have not seen him, but we know, with an inner certainty, that is both fragile and unshakeable, that he is really looking at us, that he has seen the deepest part of us, the part that we don't always dare to look at, that troubles us, that we're not proud of.

The selves we allow the world to see are veiled in layers of protection and deception. Unveiling these layers requires an abundance of love and patience, allowing us to reach the essence of our true selves. A transformative and healing experience occurs when someone sees and knows us deeply, names us authentically and accepts us unconditionally. “I saw you...”

It is Jesus’ perceptive gaze that allowed Nathanael to see who Jesus is: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” It is when we experience being seen on such a personal level, that we find ourselves able to see others. It is when we have been loved to the essence of our being that we find the power to love other people as God loves us.

Over and over, Jesus emerges from the ordinary facets of our life, as he emerged from Nazareth, and calls us out from under the fig tree, urging us to open ourselves to see God present and at work in the most unexpected places and people. Come and see: salvation and healing happen in seemingly desolate circumstances. Despairing life situations can unexpectedly bear fruit. Reconciliation and peace can be revealed in relationships we were certain to be irreparable.

Nathanael’s name, which in Hebrew means “God has given,” carries a promise from Jesus to see “greater things” than their surprising encounter. We, too, are embraced by this promise. We will see heaven open. We will see the love and justice of God. There is no place, time, circumstance, or situation beyond God’s redemptive power. There are no limits to God’s capacity to restore and resurrect. This is the hope we should cling to, the hope we must offer to the world today, and tomorrow, and each and every day, as we live boldly into the calling of Epiphany: recognise that God is near and God is speaking. Recognise that many good things can come out of Nazareth.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany**

**Oppède and Manosque**

**14<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' must be one of the most memorable put-downs in history. Nathanael, Philip's friend (usually identified with the Bartholomew of the other Gospels), was from Cana, the scene of the wedding at which Jesus turned water into wine. Cana was smarter than Nazareth, albeit only six kilometres away.

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' is a good example of how prejudice works within us. We are quick to judge others on the first facts we learn about them. Some primal instinct in us is trying to work out if they are friend or foe. We often try to protect ourselves from the 'other', the one who is different, surrounding ourselves instead with people we think are 'like us'.

Philip replies to Nathanael, not 'Yes you're quite right, Nazareth's the back of beyond', but 'Come and see'. And so Nathanael encounters Jesus, and is astonished. For the thing which was both most disturbing and most healing for those who encountered Jesus was that he saw into their heart. It was the same with the call of the other first disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John. He knew not only how frail, impetuous and fallible they were, but he also saw what

they had it in them to become - both the actual and the potential. As he called ordinary, fallible people to be with him, he slowly and patiently drew out of them a potential for courage and self-giving love that they never knew they possessed. 'You *are* Simon the fisherman; you *shall* be Peter the Rock.'

You are – you shall be. The Christian journey is a discovery of our true selves, our full humanity, along with the true nature of other people and of God. In the image used by Jesus to Nathanael, we are invited to stand at the foot of Jacob's ladder, and see heaven opened. St Augustine called it 'becoming what you are'. Becoming more truly yourself as the loved child of God. The experience of being confronted by Jesus involves knowing at the deepest level what it means to be loved, to be forgiven, to be believed in. For our lives are about call and response, as Samuel in our Old Testament reading discovered.

The season of Epiphany, which began last week, is all about this process. It's about the disclosure of Jesus, told in three encounters. First, the revelation to the Magi, travelling far beyond their comfort zones in response to an intuition that this was something life-changing. Secondly, the Baptism of Jesus, in which his significance was revealed to John the Baptist and those around him. Thirdly, the wedding of Cana, at which people began to discover the effect Jesus can have on things. Where there seems to be scarcity, suddenly there is abundance. The water of human experience is transformed into the wine of heaven. 600 gallons of it, at a country wedding.

Nathanael's response anticipates it all: 'you are the Son of God!' At the end of the Gospel we will hear those words again, on the lips of the centurion at the foot of the Cross. Another epiphany. Another disclosure.



In W H Auden's Christian oratorio *For the time being*, the Magi explain what has led them to Bethlehem: the reason they follow the star is 'to discover how to be human now'. Writing about this, the late Sydney Evans, Dean of King's College London, noted how over the centuries fearfulness and defensiveness had affected Christianity. He argued that the sense of the Church as an exclusive society needed to be broken down, in order for 'the power of the Christ-life to be liberated into the upsurging vitalities of new generations'. 'What constitutes the Church', wrote Evans, 'is the recognition by certain human beings of what it really means to be alive and to be human in this world. ... For the truth about the human situation is both a disclosure and a demand. Once you see this truth, it lays a claim on you to adopt certain attitudes and make certain responses to life ... to make a choice for or against love as the ruling principle of [your] life.'

Disclosure and demand. That's what the Gospel does to us. It asks: are we to open ourselves to new ways of thinking? Are we to open ourselves to the richness of the potential of others, however different they seem?

One thing Jesus consistently did during his ministry was to include within the vision of the Kingdom of God those who were marginalised by the society of his time, especially by the religious authorities. Whenever he was asked: 'Is it [the Kingdom] for them too?', his answer was 'Yes, for they too are loved by God'. His inclusiveness is contrasted with the exclusiveness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Why do religions operate exclusiveness? Often it is out of fear. In Jesus's time a disaster had happened – invasion and occupation by imperial Rome. The

Pharisees clung to the idea that if they could bring everyone back to strict compliance with the purity codes of the Law, of which they viewed themselves the guardians, somehow the disaster would come to an end. And here was this wandering preacher breaking all the rules. Touching everything which, and everyone who, was impure, unclean. Eating food with unwashed hands. Welcoming those who were foreign, touching those who were ill, eating with those who were beyond respectability. 'Is it for them too?', asked the disciples. 'No', shouted the Pharisees. 'Yes', said Jesus, 'for they too are loved by God'.

The Pharisees were particularly good at 'othering' whole categories of people. It's a thing we are all prone to do, and we need to be on our guard against it. How often do we exclude people from our orbit because they are different? The frustrating and wonderful thing about the Church is that it's full of people who are different from us, whom we are called to love, surprised to find that they too are children of God. 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' 'Yes,' says Jesus: 'Come and see.'

Two thousand years later, the process of God's inclusive revelation is still going on. Later this week, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will begin, when different denominations come together to worship and make friendships. Despite our different histories and heritage, we are reminded that in Christ we are all one. 'Is it for them too?' I hope you will come to our joint celebration and discover that the answer is 'Yes'.

God's inclusive revelation is also going on within (as well as between) church denominations. Eighty years ago, the first woman was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Communion: Florence Li Tim-Oi. Thirty years ago, on 12<sup>th</sup> March, the first women were ordained as priests in the Church of England. Twenty years later, the Church finally approved the consecration of women as bishops. 'Is it

for them too?' A diminishing minority in the Church continues to shout 'No'. For the majority who have said 'yes', no one doubts the immense blessing that the ordination of women has brought to the Church.

Today, the current debate in the Church of England (which is also going on in other denominations) is about the extent to which people who identify as LGBTI+ should be included. 'Is it for them too?' 'No', shout a minority in the Church, apprehensive of the other who is different. 'Yes', say the majority, 'for they too are loved by God'.

It all began with a visit of foreigners to the stable, way outside their comfort zones, who received the revelation of an inclusive, incarnate God, who continues to break down barriers as fast as we try to build them.

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' 'Come,' says Jesus, 'and see'.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany - Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

**All Saints' Marseille**

**21<sup>st</sup> January 2024**

*The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Curate*

On the third day, there was a wedding in the Cana of Galilee – and the wine gave out.

Can you recall all the weddings you have ever attended? They've undoubtedly made an impression, haven't they? One can remember details of a wedding many years later: the bride's attire, the music, the cake, and the suspense of who would catch the bouquet. Sometimes, it's the mishaps that carve the most lasting impressions. These glitches become the fodder for anecdotes. People meticulously plan, build up expectations of the perfect day, and then the slightest hiccup feels like a disaster.

'They have no wine.' Abundance and joy are meant for a wedding day. This shouldn't be a story of scarcity! After all, a wedding is a metaphor for things turning out right in the end.

We know so well that the story of the wedding in Cana culminates in a display of extravagant abundance. The transformation of water into wine is an unmistakable revelation of God's generosity: an epiphany, a manifestation of God's glory in Jesus – amidst preparations, preoccupations, expectations, in the face of muddle and failure.

There is also an abundance of theological significance in this much-loved Gospel passage. Beyond its surface, it teems with symbols that invite a deeper understanding: the importance of hospitality, celebration and joy in our lives that is affirmed by Jesus' offering copious gallons of first-rate wine – affirming that life in abundance is the divine intention for all humanity. The narrative echoes later in the Gospel of John when Jesus says: 'I have come that they might

have life and have it abundantly' (10:10). There is also the foreshadowing of the Eucharist in the sharing of the wine, resonating with the imagery from the Book of Revelation we read this morning: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb', a phrase familiar to us before partaking in Communion. Finally, the banquet serves as a symbol of the joy and celebration inherent in the salvation that God prepares for all peoples, as the prophet Isaiah describes it: 'a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines' (Isaiah 25:6).

All this is worth meditating upon. Yet here we also have a story for people whose reservoirs of hope have run dry. 'They have no wine.' With these words, the mother of Jesus, Mary, speaks a truth about our lives. 'They have no wine.' – this is both a personal and a global reality. Each one of us could tell a story about a day the wine of life gave out or turned bitter. It might be the death of a loved one or the loss of a friendship; the unfulfilled search for love and acceptance; a thirst for meaning; the weight of disappointments, guilt, or anxiety about an uncertain future; or a sense of personal failure.

Every day, we find ourselves echoing Mary's words, in myriad renditions, not only on our behalf, but also for others. Life, for many, feels at times like a wedding where the wine has given out - a scenario where joy seems to have dissipated. In the present moment of our existence, in the poverty of our nature, we need to see the riches of God's grace; to taste the wine of Christ's presence.

What, then, is the role of the mother of Jesus at the wedding at Cana? It may seem odd, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, to reflect on Mary's role, when we know all too well that one of the primary points of contention between some Church traditions is belief regarding the mother of Jesus. Yet, irrespective of what our personal belief is, Mary offers us a pathway into the heart of today's Gospel story, because, sometimes, these are the only words we can articulate when trying to speak to God: They have no wine. – There is need here. These are words that insist, against all odds, on the power of telling God the truth in prayer.

Mary observes what is amiss, she discerns the need. She understands that the guests would long remember the breach of hospitality implied by the lack of wine. If John's account holds true, Mary is the first to notice, preceding even Jesus in her awareness.

Turning to the right person for help, Mary confidently relies on her understanding of her son and trusts that he alone can address the need she perceived. She is certain of his generosity.

Mary persists. We don't know what to make of Jesus' initial reluctance to help. 'What concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.', he responds. Perhaps there is a timeline known only to him and to God, yet Mary doesn't yield to his hesitation. Instead, she continues to impress upon him the urgency of the need, persistently bringing it into Jesus' presence.

Mary instills trust and invites obedience. She doesn't claim to understand the details of Jesus' plan. Instead, she simply communicates her reliance on Jesus' loving, generous character, and encourages the servants to embody the obedience that is the bedrock of faith. She acts as a catalyst and transforms potential into action.

The task of holding up the promise of God's abundance against the harsh realities of scarcity, loss, and need is not a light one. Regardless of how we rethink Mary's words to match our circumstances, they ring true for all of us: They have no wine.

What can our place be in a miracle of plenty, standing alongside sisters and brothers from diverse Church traditions, who earnestly pursue the unity which is Christ's will for us and for the world?

Maybe we can be, together, like Mary: become keen observers, incessantly naming, persisting, and trusting. We can name the empty and dry places even when the means to fill them remain elusive. 'They have no food, no justice, no security, no health, no money, no safety.' 'We have no vision or direction for our lives.' 'They have no wine.' We can surely do that together.

No matter how impossible the situation, no matter how deep the scarcity, we turn to Jesus earnestly for help, and make ourselves ready for action. We can be truthful with God, even in moments of celebration, holding up the realities of human need, resisting the allure of denial, apathy or distraction. And we can invite others to obey the winemaker we have come to know and trust. 'They have no wine.' 'Do whatever he tells you.' In this tension between acknowledgement and action, let us dwell with confidence in the One whose help we seek, for he is good and generous and desires us to have life in abundance.

Amen.

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**  
**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**  
**Sermon – Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Candlemas**  
**All Saints' Marseille**  
**28<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

It's an extraordinary moment in the Gospels. The young parents arrive to fulfil the ritual prescribed by their faith, presenting their child to God. Under the law it was prescribed, as part of the ritual, that they were symbolically to redeem (to buy back) the child by paying for something to be sacrificed by the priests. The wealthy would buy a lamb, those of more modest means two small birds. Already awed by the vastness of the Temple, they are met by two elderly people who utter mysterious prophecy, claiming that their child has a destiny that is special and unique.

Today is Candlemas, the day on which the Church recalls the presentation of Christ in the Temple. For Simeon and Anna, seeing the infant Jesus brought by his parents to be presented to God was a moment that showed them all the beauty, all the depth and all the significance that life holds. Simeon took the baby in his arms and recognised him for who he was: 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people, Israel'. And that was enough for him – there was nothing more that he wanted after the long years of waiting. A moment which revealed the significance of everything, not just for Simeon but also for the whole world. His words are an echo from the prophet Isaiah (49.6),

where it says of the figure known as the 'suffering servant' with whom Jesus is often identified: 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.' All peoples will be brought home to God, their creator.

Candlemas is the last official day of Christmas. Like the forty days of resurrection from Easter to Ascension, these past forty days of incarnation and epiphany have kept before us the vision of the Word made flesh. At the Feast of the Presentation, the emphasis of Simeon's words are that this is the light of the world, the light of all people. We who stand by are also ready to sing our own *Nunc Dimittis*, for we have seen all that is worth seeing: we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. We can depart in peace.

There are different layers to this story, which is rich in meaning. By focusing on the temple and its traditions, Luke – writing for a largely Gentile audience – was keen to emphasise the continuity of the Christian story with Judaism. Remembering this is as important to us now as it was at the time Luke was writing his account. The failure of the Church at times to recognise its deep roots in Judaism has, tragically, resulted in a collusion with the many persecutions suffered by the Jewish people through the centuries. We do well to recall this in the week when in the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Day has been kept.

Some of you may be familiar with the paintings of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple by Rembrandt, one of which is at the top of your service sheets. He painted it many times, returning to it again and again, intrigued by the interplay of themes: intimacy and vastness, infancy and old age, life's dawning and its



evening, promise and fulfilment, darkness and light. One thing that is striking about the paintings is their scale. They show the vast spaces of the temple and, at its centre, the tiny figures of the holy family. The huge shadows seem to press in on that tiny point of light. We are left wondering if the light will grow in that darkness and finally overcome it, or is the darkness about to close in on the light, to extinguish it?

The paintings are also accurate on a deeper level. They show things as they are, the dark and light realities which God takes on as he shares our human condition. For we know that Christmas, however beautiful and hope-filled, has not suddenly made the world all right again, though we have longed and prayed for peace on earth and goodwill to all people. The shadows and the darkness are real. The Candlemas story foretells the child's destiny: Mary is told that a sword will pierce her own soul too. She is warned of another, crueller, presentation of Christ, when he will be handed over in the same city to suffer death on a cross. For Simeon intuitively knows that this child's holiness will be received by others as a challenge to their authority, and that it will lead to suffering. Yet at the same time this child's arrival is fulfilling the world's greatest hope. Living that paradox is one of the challenges of our faith.

So Candlemas, as well as joy, has a poignancy about it. We say farewell to the celebration of Christmas, and tomorrow will be 'ordinary time' again, and before long Lent and ashes. The Eastern Christians call Candlemas 'the meeting', a meeting between old and new covenant, Christmas and Lent, nativity and cross. In the Candlemas ceremony at the end of our service, we will mark the end of Christmas by blowing out the candles we have been given. In Advent we celebrated darkness to light, and now, on the face of it, we seem to have the

opposite – light to darkness: the human pattern so familiar in our world as we watch nations and peoples being drawn into conflict and destructiveness. It is familiar to people with no home or work or friends. Familiar to anyone who has lost someone they loved. Familiar to all of us in a hundred different ways. It is as if a shadow falls across what light we have.

It's a strange time of year, which makes us wonder about the mystery of things. How our light, glorious as it is, is only partial. Yet it is also true that the days are growing longer and the promise of spring just beginning to be felt, especially on these Mediterranean shores. Spring will come, and Lent's lengthening light, and soon we will move towards Easter. Today we light candles of longing in dark places and, even when they are put out, we keep the memory of a precious flame alive. For the good news of this child's story, the ultimate source of Simeon and Anna's joy, is that suffering and death do not have the last word. The story ends not in death but in resurrection.

A contemporary hymn writer offers us this assurance, and this prayer:

'For the light is stronger than the darkness  
and the day will overcome the night;  
though the shadows linger all around us,  
let us turn our faces to the light.'

Amen.