

30th Jan -Candlemas

The bible begins with light in the darkness - in the beginning the earth was formless and dark and God said - let there be light.

Without light there would be no life

The sun is the source of all our energy and power - even those dreaded fossil fuels are burning energy stored by plants through photosynthesis thousands of years ago. Light is life. Humans live in all parts of the world - the cold of Antarctica, the heat of the desert, the wet of the Pacific ocean but nowhere do they live permanently underground. Only the dwarves in fantasy writing can live without light.

And think of light and fire and what it means to us - the myths that talk of humans stealing fire from the Gods - the distinction it makes us an animal that can control fire and use it like a tool for heat and cooking.

Light is what we need to chase away our fears of what lurks in the dark. Light gives us hope and a lack of light is linked depression and illness.

So God speaks first and there is light - and then there is life - for the universe, our galaxy, our planet and us.

And then see how fire and light appear in the Biblical narrative...

There is a fire from a bush as God speaks to Moses

Fire on the mountain as he gets the 10 commandments

There is fire from heaven, as Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal

There is a fiery pillar that leads the Israelites on their escape from Egypt and in the desert.

When the kingdom is split in two the people are led away into captivity and darkness.

The hope of return from exile is about a light - dawning - hope coming back.

And all through scripture light is also a metaphor for wisdom and understanding - your word is a light unto my path - it says in proverbs. Think of the new testament where "blindness" means spiritual as well as physical.

So the season Epiphany - the coming of the light - ends today.

And I've learnt some new things about Epiphany - the revealing of God, the coming of the light -

Which I used to think was just the magi on their camels - in the orthodox church is about 3 events - each of which shines a light on who Christ is, each of which reveals Jesus.

Yes - the maji - represent Jesus being for all the world, not just Jews. These foreigners come and worship our Lord, and the fulfilment of prophecies - that nations will come to you. These people had seen the light, been enlightened - about who Jesus really was.

Secondly - The baptism of Jesus - when he is revealed as Messiah - remember John has been looking for the one, and looking for a sign, and then here's the voice and dove - ahh - lightbulb moment. Epiphany moment.

And then thirdly - the wedding at Cana - again when I was growing up we'd be doing all this "Christmas" stuff, and Jesus as a baby, then suddenly its - baptism, and then he's at a wedding - and I'm like - why are you telling the story like that?!

But its because, when Jesus turns the water into wine at the wedding in Cana - John calls it the first of the signs, revealing who Jesus is.

Jesus shows us that he has come to change the order of things - the way we used to relate to God, through sacrifice and washing and purity - to a relationship of joy, feasting. We are no longer waiting and preparing and striving to reach God - God has come to us, is with us, and now is the time to party and be glad.

And the season of Epiphany ends with Candlemas - what some people called "layered in meaning" - others would say its just a confused mess and you can make it mean whatever you want! Its a bit about the presentation in the temple, also about Simeon and Anna make prophecies that he is a "light to the gentiles" but also that he is destined for suffering. And there is also the element of purification of Mary after childbirth, something that was significant in health terms back 2000 years ago, and still marked till quite recently by the churching of women - giving thanks for getting through childbirth - in catholic, protestant and orthodox churches. So like I say - the meaning of Candlemas is very layered / messy

But what about the candles. In medieval times the church would bless candles and give them out to protect people's homes in the coming year. We celebrate the birth of Christ - bringing light into the world, and the days get lighter, and we take the light of Christ into our homes - to give us hope and strength.

And I thought that after the pandemic, it would be good to give out a symbol of everlasting hope to us all.

It may take us years to realise what we've come through, and the cost of it all. Never before has 3/5ths of the planet been locked up at home. Never before have our schools been shut overnight. The things that make us human - socialising together, being with family, hugs and touching - you see - we've been through something quite traumatic. And as we come out the other side we need to have hope. Not in

our politicians, or human progress, but a hope from outside ourselves. A hope with strength and power beyond ourselves.

God, who spoke in the first moment to give light and life to all things.

God spoke again - and his word became mortal, flesh, become one of us - and Jesus comes to be with us. And in that famous passage -
“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

When you take this candle home - put it somewhere you can see it and light it. When you look at it, remember that Christ, God himself, came to earth as one of us, to bring us hope.

This Jesus, whom we worship, whom this church is built to serve -
He is the one who has been given the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
Philippians

This Jesus is the one for whom all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
Colossians 1

This Jesus is our hope, our unshakeable rock - our healer, saviour, friend.

All power on heaven and earth has been given to him -

There is no darkness that can overcome him - he conquered death - smashed hells gates - and ascended into heaven taking the freed prisoners with him.

And he is the one who is with us.

And this little light - stands for all that.

This pandemic candle means that whatever may befall us - Christ, the conqueror and victorious one, is with us. Now and always. Amen.

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

3

You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

4

For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

5

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. **16** John answered them all, "I baptize you with[a] water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit and fire.

17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” **18** And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, **20** Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

The Baptism and Genealogy of Jesus

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **22** and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”