**Candlemas, 2025**

So we’ve come at last to Candlemas, the fortieth day of Christmas, and whether we’ve managed to keep up the celebration all this time, let us at least celebrate today. Today is a day for the fulfilment of prophecies, for the revolution of the world, and for our own transformation. A tall order, no?

And it would have seemed so to those who happened to be in Jerusalem on that day, over two thousand years ago, when the prophecy of Malachi came to pass, and “the Lord” suddenly came “to His Temple.” Because, aside from some small disturbance about an old man and an old woman getting excited about some child, it was an ordinary day in the Temple: sacrifices to offer, vows to receive, money to count, babies to present, women to purify, and so on, the normal quotidian happenings of the Old Testament cult.

Reading Malachi, you might have expected something more dramatic. Something like the prophecy of Haggai, “thus says the Lord of Hosts: once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, […] and I will fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of Hosts.”

Or like the vision of Isaiah in the Temple, who saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the Temple. And above Him stood the seraphim […] and one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory! And the foundations shook […] and the house was filled with smoke.”

But there are different ways a thing can be sudden, and the heavens and earth might be shaken without anyone realising, and the thundering of the Voice of God is not always audible to the ears of the flesh. At the Incarnation, the Lord delighted to confound the expectations of those who looked for a king, a general, a man of earthly power and splendour for their Mesiah, and sent them instead a helpless babe.

So now He delights to work His will all-but-silently, overturning the old dispensation and ushering in the new without earthly fanfare. He will go on to work the salvation of the human race not with might and triumph, but in the shame and obscurity of the Cross, so that the works of Almighty God might be known only by those with eyes to see and ears to hear, those who are, like the aged Simeon and Anna “*waiting*” for Lord, attentive “with fasting and prayer night and day.” It is “the Lord *whom you seek*,” Who “will suddenly come to His Temple;” so suddenly that those who aren’t paying attention might miss Him completely.

Why does He do this? It can’t just be because the Lord enjoys a joke as much as anyone. Instead, I think it’s because He’s simply much more imaginative than we are: his grand irony in working as He does is a kind of rebuke to us for expecting so little, looking for a pedestrian salvation.

Rather than save us from the ‘outside’, the Lord saves us ‘from within’, by becoming one of us. “Since the children share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things,” our flesh, our blood, bodies, our souls, our birth and infancy, our life and death, our weakness, our passions, and everything that we are, “he had to be made like His brothers in every respect.”

Every respect, save our sins alone, which He took not. But let’s be more precise: He himself sinned not, but He took up *our* sins, to bear them. Sinless, He comes today to the Temple to fulfil the dictates of the Law which does not bind Him, in company with His Mother, who comes to be purified, according to custom but not according to necessity, for she too was spotless. They come, the Holy Family, to offer two young pigeons as a ransom for the world’s ransom, an sacrifice of shadows for the One True Sacrifice, and in His humility and theirs it is suffered to be so.

Thus, sinless, He went to John to be baptised, that we, His brethren, might go down into the water and rise, cleansed, to new life. Sinless, He will bear our sins on the Cross, accepting *un*justly but with marvellous imagination the punishment for sin, which is death, “that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

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We’ve got all this way without mentioning candles at all, so we better had. All of the church’s liturgical offer us some way of participating in the mysteries of God. The blessed candles at Candlemas put us in the position of Simeon, and of the Blessed Virgin, carrying the Light of the World. They are a sacramental, a sign, of the Light of Christ which we bear in us through our baptisms, by virtue of which we are in Christ and He in us. [And so in our procession into the Church, we take the place of Mary, bearing the Child into the Holy Place, a fragrant offering “pleasing to the Lord”.]

If Jesus had to made like us in every respect, “so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest,” it was in order that we in turn might become like Him. The Light which illuminates is also the fire which burns, the “refiner’s fire” of Malachi’s prophecy, purging us of our sins so that we might shine more brightly, taking our place in the light of revelation to the Gentiles, part of the glory of the people of God. Like a blessed candle, which is burnt up by its transformation into light and warmth and a pleasing odour, we ourselves are consumed, sacrifices because of Jesus’ Sacrifices, “in the service of God.”

We may suffer in that offering, as Mary had to suffer, to be pierced to the very soul by the agony of her son. We may have to endure apparently frustrated hope, as Simeon did in his long watching for the Messiah. It’s certain that, as with Anna the prophetess, we shall know loss and sorrow for loss. The working of the Lord in our lives will probably be, in worldly terms, unspectacular. But there is comfort that “the Lord of Hosts,” the “King of Glory” has come, taking up the nature not of angels but of men, “the offspring of Abraham,” to help us when we are tempted, to free us from our sins, and, by the quiet action of His grace, to set us on fire with His love.