

Candlemas 2020: Anna Chaplaincy Sermon

I want to say a word at the beginning about why I believe Anna Chaplaincy to be a profound, prescient and prophetic sign for our age. Isolation, alienation and loneliness are some of the biggest challenges we face in our age. Despite our highly 'networked society', many find – for a variety of reasons – that they are more distant than ever from their neighbours, relatives and any immediate sources of support. The impact of this on our social well-being, and on people's health in general, is a growing concern. The earliest Christian communities – in common, indeed, with other faith traditions – were very much about community and gathering. Moreover, they looked after those most likely to be pushed to the very edges of isolation and marginalisation – the widows and the orphans.

So the Early Church practiced authentic and deep community development. Not because it would be popular, or lead to church growth. But because the One whom the churches served also sought out the marginalised, demonised, lonely, neglected and isolated. And that one – Jesus – said that these people belonged to his kingdom. They would be honoured citizens there. So Anna Chaplaincy – in seeking out the elderly the lonely and the isolated does exactly what Jesus would have us do: and in so doing, we might challenge and transform our contemporary society.

What then, of Candlemas – today? I'll answer the question. But let me begin somewhere else. The 2nd February is Groundhog Day. People in certain parts of the USA, particularly Pennsylvania, gather waiting for a sign. Crowds gather to see what happens when a groundhog or woodchuck (the size of a small badger) comes out of his burrow. The Groundhog comes out and looks around, if it sees his shadow retreats into their burrow. This is seen a sign that the winter weather will last for at least 6 more weeks.

The custom came to Pennsylvania from Dutch and German traditions and it connects to many folk traditions about the 2nd February Candlemas and the weather. A traditional German poem translates as:

*For as the sun shines on Candlemas Day
So far will the snow swirl until May
For as the snow blows on Candlemas day so far will the sun shine before May.*

And an English rhyme...

*If Candlemas be fair and bright
Winter has another flight
If Candlemas brings cloud and rain
Winter will not come again.*

This February feast marked that darkest time of the year. When the cold seemed to have lasted a long time and people wanted a sign that pointed to spring, new life, warmer weather and so on. In the Church it was the feast day for blessing the candles, the means of light in the

darkness. It is a feast about looking forward about waiting for a sign and recognising the light that lightens the whole world.

The timing of Candlemas is dictated by Jewish custom. If Jesus was born on 25th December (a notional date of course set in midwinter) then 40 days later would mark the day of purification for his mother Mary and the ritual sacrifices laid down in the Levitical law. Mary, Joseph and the child come to offer their sacrifice of two doves and to present the first-born son in the Jerusalem temple.

There in the Temple Luke tells us the Holy Family encounter two individuals. The first is Simeon, a righteous and pious man who has been waiting for the consolation of Israel. Tradition has assumed that Simeon was an old man, mainly because of the opening words of the song he says 'Now let your servant depart in peace' which has been seen as a way of saying now I can die happy. But the bible does not say he was old, and I like to think he may not have been. Waiting as a younger person means the years stretch ahead, and the task is arguably harder. Perhaps only middle-aged, he's in for the long haul. For all we know is that Simeon's sense of waiting has been altered, he can now rest from his watchfulness because he has seen the sign he was waiting for.

We do not know if Simeon expected to see a child. We do not know how long he had been watching and waiting. We simply know that something in this particular child was recognised by him and he could leave in peace because even if nothing had happened he could now trust in a new way that it would. The light had come into the world and it was a light not just for the consolation of Israel but a light that would reveal truth to the gentiles as well.

Anna is definitely elderly. A widow who has made the Temple courts her home for a long time. Her life is dedicated to prayer and worship. She too responds to this child and speaks of the hope he brings for those waiting for the redemption of Israel.

For Simeon and Anna, the child Jesus was a sign of hope, a pointer to the end of darkness and the coming of salvation, light and redemption. Yet, he was a mere babe in arms. We are told that it was many years later that Jesus began his ministry at the age of 33. Then he began to speak of the kingdom and through signs and wonders draw the crowds and change the way people thought about God.

Candlemas marks that interesting point when waiting for Simeon and Anna moved from a prayerful long-term hope into something more concrete, still not yet but definitely coming. From the waiting being about a yearning for God to act it becomes a trust that God is acting and in time the reality of that will be seen.

Anna and Simeon have both waited; kept their counsel, waited, and waited, and waited. I like their part in this aspect of the Christmas story, for waiting is what many of us must do. But there is an important distinction I must make here: that between waiting and dithering; of being patient and of being delayed. Let me say more.

Some of us like Simeon and Anna are nearing the point where we must let go, let go of projects, people or our place in this world. We offer ourselves and all that we have worked for to God. We pray as they prayed for a sign – a sign that all that we have valued and worked for and prayed for will continue to matter when we can no longer guard the flame. And we trust that our future like our past is held in the eternity of God’s love. We can go in peace.

Some of us are in the midst of long winters complex situations where we feel our resources are over stretched our ability to be active is limited. These may be to do with the wider realities of our uncertain politics, the long-term responsibility of jobs that are unfulfilling or overwhelming; loved ones for whose caring needs are all consuming and draining, personal periods of waiting for a change.

Like the proverbial Groundhog we raise our heads looking for the sign that winter is drawing to a close. Whether the way ahead looks long, or the signs of thaw are apparent we need to not despair, to trust that God always sends the spring, new life will come, the sun will shine and the light will increase. We offer our situations praying that God will sustain us through the dark months and enable us to recognise the signs of new life when they begin to appear.

Part of the genius of the Christmas and Candlemas narratives is rooted in the proactive work of Anna Chaplaincy. Sometimes we need to seek Jesus – to go looking for him and make an effort. But the gospel also tells it another way. To those who cannot move or do not know, God will come to you. Later in the life of Jesus, Jesus will meet seekers, but he will also proactively seek the neglected, confused, lost and ignorant, and those who’d never thought of looking. God is there for them just as much.

We commit ourselves to living hopefully. Hope is lighting a candle in the midst of the darkness and saying to the darkness of ageing, or isolation and loneliness: “I beg to differ”. So, Jesus is in the temple to be consecrated as a first born male, as the custom demands. But as with all such customs, the blessings will flow both ways. Simeon and Anna are blessed just as much as the One they came to bless. So, may you be blessed as you wait; and wait with those who have waited longer. The light shines for us all, and the darkness will not overcome it. Amen.

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