

May we open our hearts, ears and our eyes to hear your word Lord and to see your will in our lives.

Amen

When Steve suggested I preach today he told me it was Candlemas. As is not all that unusual I looked at him with some level of perplexity. I'd never heard of Candlemas. So I thought I would look it up and find out a little more about it and tell you in case you, like me had not come across it before.

So Candlemas is usually celebrated on 2nd February or the Sunday preceding it. It is traditionally an ancient festival which marks the midpoint of winter, (clearly in the northern hemisphere) halfway between the shortest day and the spring equinox.

It is a traditional Christian festival that commemorates the purification of Mary forty days after the birth of her son Jesus. On this day, Christians also remember the presentation of Jesus Christ in the Temple. Forty days after the birth of a Jewish boy, it was the custom to take him to the temple in Jerusalem to be presented to God by his thankful parents.

In pre-Christian times, this day was known as the 'Feast of Lights' and celebrated the increased strength of the life-giving sun as winter gave way to spring (again clearly a northern tradition)

So how did the 2nd February come to be called Candlemas?

Well again traditionally this was the day of the year when all the candles, that were used in the church during the coming year, were brought into church and a blessing was said over them - so it was the Festival Day (or 'mass') of the Candles. Candles were important in those days not only because there was no electric lights. Some people thought they gave protection against plague and illness and famine. For Christians, they were (and still are) a reminder of something even more important. Before the birth of Jesus, it was as if everyone was 'in the dark'. People often felt lost and lonely. Afraid. As if they were on their own, with no one to help them. Then came Jesus with his message that he, along with his followers, is always ready to help and comfort them, as if he is a guiding light to them in the darkness. Christians often talk of Jesus as

'the light of the World' - and candles are lit during church services to remind us of this.

But today I'm not going to preach on Candlemas, the purification of Mary or even the presentation of Jesus at the Temple - partly because our readings today don't reflect any of these great events but really, for those of you who know me will know that I just couldn't let our first reading from Micah go by without comment.

We all know it don't we? and many of love it -especially the last verse - What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness , and to walk humbly with your God? In our own ways, I think we all try to live by this ancient statement of faith. There are not many summaries of the genuinely Godly life that can surpass Micah 6:8.

But in reality, we know very little about Micah, except what little can be gathered from the text. We know that Micah's times were dangerous and the ruling bodies were unstable, tradition religious practices had declined and probably idolatry had become common. Many would recognise a familiarity in today's social and political culture. Micah is writing in the 8th century (give or take a little) before Christ was born. It is a time of political confusion. His message is set against the background of the arrogance of the powerful and rich and the destitution of the poor. Nothing seems to have changed very much. Micah is still relevant today, both for our role in the church and our role in the secular community.

In trying to find something different to talk about when I was thinking through the Micah reading, I came across a saying of the Dalai Lama which stayed in my mind for a long time. It is

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion!"

This is clearly what Micah is talking about. What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" We can't do this if we are focused on ourselves, it is impossible if we think dualistically - that we stand alone and are separate from others. We cannot walk humbly with our God if we live without compassion. Compassion means to suffer alongside with others, not just feel sorry for them. We cannot "walk humbly with our God" if our ego is so tightly self-enclosed that we are unable to suffer when others suffer.

I'll repeat it the Dalai Lama's saying

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion!"

I would like you to remember this because I'll come back to it.

Our Gospel reading today - The Beatitudes of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount - I believe echo the word of the Prophet Micah. The compassion Micah calls for is clearly evident in the words of Jesus.

The Beatitudes of Jesus, among other things, are a list of sufferings. Jesus calls these suffering people "blessed." Translating the word as "blessed" in Matthew 5 is probably another example of how we have taken words that in the day of Jesus had ordinary meaning and given them a technical religious meaning today. The word simply means "happy" in Greek. Really? Where does that come from? It's a bit hard to swallow isn't it? Clearly it is counterintuitive.

And to say they are happy is even more counterintuitive than to say they are blessed. How can the poor in spirit, or those who mourn, or those who are hungry, be happy? When I think of destitution of war-torn streets, I ask where is God, or I see the mourning of a mother grieving her dead child, when I think of the plight of refugees, their helplessness (or meekness, I find it hard to see any happiness or blessings.

Why would Jesus say this? Jesus is obviously more radical than we would like him to be. He is outrageously stretching our conventional way of thinking.

Jesus knew that life isn't all about the good times in fact for many of us it's in the good times that we kind of forget a bit about Jesus and all he has done for us. But it is often in the hard times, the times when life is just not good, that we truly encounter God.

Life is not, after all, full of special times, full of special moments. Life is full of other stuff, it is full of routines, or ordinary things: we work, we eat, we sleep, we play, we relax, we suffer and feel pain, we sorrow and grieve, we are insulted and injured, we struggle and fight against trials and tribulations. In these ordinary times and ordinary places, when we are at home, at work, in hospital, visiting a friend, driving our car, or sitting in a meeting. Ordinary times, ordinary places - not what you

would think to be Holy places, not where we expect to meet God. Well these are the very times and places where **God meets us**, if we allow that to happen. Jesus was talking about the ordinary times of his culture, the realities of the world as it was and as it is.

One of the things that really hit me when reading through the scriptures for today was the difference between the Old Testament readings and New Testament readings in relation to the understanding of relationship between God and humanity. In the Micah reading and the Psalm, there is a great list of what people have to do, or not do, to be in relationship with a right God. But in the Gospel, Jesus is telling us that God meets us in the realities of life. We don't have to try to live up to this great, and seemingly impossible list of religious and behavioural models to be right with God. Even the Corinthians reading says that God is not known through the wisdom and power of this world, but in the foolishness of the cross, which, to those who believe, is the wisdom and power of God. It's all about God's grace - we don't have to earn it, we certainly don't deserve it, but it is given freely nonetheless.

Both the Micah reading and the Matthew Gospel are simply about those who are living out their lives in faith, those who go about, seeking to do what is right, those who are able to feel their pain and express it, those who are trying to show mercy, those who are willing to accept insult and injury for the sake of doing what is right, those who seek to make peace, those who are walking humbly before God, as best as they can through the realities of life, are met by God. God encounters them. God inhabits them, God strengthens them.

Both Jesus and the Dalai Lama know this. I come back to the Dalai Lama's saying

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion!"

If you want to be happy, practice compassion, suffer with and for other people. Yet if we practice compassion merely for the purpose of being happy, we will be caught up in the ego, and become self-centeredly sad. It must be done naturally, almost thoughtlessly. Practicing compassion will lead us to suffering and happiness at the same time. Life is often a paradox. Those mentioned in the Beatitudes are happy because God

meet them in their pain, in the reality of life and because they selflessly turned toward others in mercy and forgiveness.

Last week we heard from Richard Harris one way we may practically practice compassion. At the back of the church I have put up a display including details of the Ray of Hope project and other areas where we can become involved in doing Justice, Loving kindness and walking humbly with God

We live in an upside down world - Jesus turns the way we think about our world upside down, God meets us in ways we do not expect, in our weakness, in our grief, in our hunger for salvation, in our attempts to do what is right, in our pain and suffering in our foolishness. The Dalai Lama tells us that compassion for others sets us free in joy.

The proof is not found in great visions and great moments of religious ecstasy, but in our growth in understanding, in our increase in love, in our acceptance and faith in the midst of continual trouble, in our doing of justice, in our love of kindness, in our humble walking with God.

<https://preachingtip.com/archives-year-a/epiphany/4-epiphany-year-a/1/1>

<http://projectbritain.com/year/candlemas.html> 2/5

John Shearman and Richard J Fairchild (2006)