A Light to lighten the Gentiles

The human race spends an enormous amount of effort making light. Think for a little about the technology and infrastructure, the literal energy and effort we invest in the ability to light up a room. Think about how light makes it into our thinking and speaking. We 'shed light on situations'. We are 'enlightened'. We 'see the light'. Light is not comfort. It is essence of life.

We also have a serious fondness for darkness. Humanity spends an enormous amount of effort covering light up. Some darkness is, of course, to be welcomed. When you want to see the stars, artificial light is 'pollution'. Light, like when the car coming the other way doesn't dip its headlights, can blind you. But where light is good, covering it up is not good. We can be 'kept in the dark'. We can 'hide our light'. Things done in the dark often represent the worst things humanity can do.

This season, 'Candlemas', or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is about light and relates to the making of light. For much of human history candles were essential bringers of light into darkness. As the sun set the fire was lit, the lamps tended. We are used to a simple flick of the switch these days. To move around a house one candle at a time was much more poetic, and the lighting of the lamps became a religious act. When darkness was so overwhelming, the lighting of an individual light took on profound meaning and was charged with hope.

The festival of Candlemas commemorates the moment when Jesus was presented in the Temple – a ritual then much like baptism today. There he was recognised by a devout believer as the person whose life and death would be the means of revelation, illumination and warning to all the non Jewish peoples of the earth. He is also to be the fulfilment of all the hopes of Israel, God's original people.

In church that moment is remembered every time the *Nunc Dimittis* is sung. It is such a part of our evening worship – first in Compline, then, since Cranmer, at Evensong, that we can become dulled to its challenge. It's a massively radical statement. Listen again to what Simeon sang:

> God's promise has been fulfilled. This child is the means of rescue, for every single human being on the planet. He is a Jew, but will be light, piercing the darkness for all the peoples of the world. He is everything the Jews have been waiting for and everything a dark world needs.

Hear the poetry and the significance of light and darkness here. Think of the context. Empires and civilisations are clashing, Rome dominates, and Palestine is a small dot on a large map. And this tiny child in a small corner of a vast empire is lifted up by an old man and called salvation, glory, rescue, hope, light, for the entire world. Simeon's race had a tradition of shining a piercing light not only on individual human motivations: the darkness of selfishness and greed and abuse of power which we can recognise in ourselves; but also into the darkness of the affairs of nations and the darkness of injustice and oppression. This child, said Simeon, is light in the darkness of the heart and the world.

Think of the world situation now. I have to say that, in the last twenty four hours, I have become despondent and despairing. The Church of England is convulsing again over sexuality, morality and ethics, and our bishops have, frankly, waffled themselves to a standstill, to the extent that, for most people, we are now an anachronism and an irrelevance. I can talk about that later, if you like. Much more significantly, the Leader of the Free World has taken decisions, which he said he would, which are affecting countless people and nations and reinforcing hostility and prejudice across the world.

There is a ban on people just because they were born in a nation. There is a ban on the most vulnerable people in the world even from participating a programme of rehoming which, up until yesterday, was carefully managed and demonstrably effective. What Donald Trump makes of Matthew 25 I do not know. And we have no high ground from which to view all this. We've taken in far fewer Syrian refugees than most countries in the world, and our Prime Minister, the daughter of a Vicar, reused to make a clear comment last night, while celebrating an arms deal with a nation which last year locked up more journalists than any other nation in the world. Contrast Theresa May with the Prime Minister of Canada. Contrast that with the Pope. This is a dark time.

Yet, tonight, at Evensong, we will sing 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace' Christians proclaim that Jesus continues to be the light of the world, continues to be the one in whom all conflicts can find their resolution, all wars find their peace, the one who is the fulfilment of all human hopes and strivings. This should lead Christians into some tough situations, and requires much of us. It means being the light and proclaiming Christ to everyone and in the darkest places and the darkest times. It means proclaiming Christ to the indifferent, the hostile, and the devout of other faiths.

It also means taking a long look at ourselves. The attitudes of some Christians to their fellow believers, even in the same congregation, let alone in the church up the road, are frankly staggering. How can Christians proclaim Christ as a light drawing all people to himself when we disagree on the type of bulb he might use? It doesn't take people long to spot hypocrisy, and to walk away from it. Christ's light shines into every act and every word.

When a candle shines in darkness, things are seen in a new light. When Christians say that Jesus is the light of the world it reinterprets the world as it is, and shows the world as it might be. That can mean an uncomfortable light being shone into our own motives, and the secret places of our heart. But only that way can we, and our community, and our society and world ever be changed. As we proclaim Christ Light of the World, ask yourself what is being illuminated for you, and what you can illuminate with the light within you. And go and make the difference.