CANDLEMASS Luke 2:22-40

It is the day 40 days after Christmas when we remember Jesus’ presentation at the Temple, and it is traditionally a time when candles are blessed in churches, as our candles represent Jesus being the light of the world. And because in our Gospel reading today, Simeon calls Jesus ‘a light to lighten the gentiles’

And it is also a time in our church calendar when our focus shifts away from the nativity and towards the cross. We move from Epiphany into preparing for lent which is why today it is also sometimes called ‘bitter-sweet Sunday’

Jesus’ presentation at the temple was an important ceremony for Mary and Joseph’s Jewish faith. In Leviticus 12, Jewish families were told that a woman is ritually unclean after she has given birth for 40 days if she has a son, and 80 days if she has a daughter. So, 40 days after Jesus is born Mary and Joseph brought Him to the temple and made a sacrifice so that Mary could become ritually clean again. As she was poor Mary offered 2 birds as a sacrifice rather than a lamb (which she could not afford) Also, the Jews believed that a first born son was sacred to God and needed to be brought to the temple in Jerusalem and presented to the Lord, which is what Mary and Joseph did.

And in the Temple is Simeon. He was a good and devout man who prayed and worshipped in the Temple and was full of the Holy Spirit. In fact he was one of the ‘quiet in the land’. This was not a phrase I had come across until quite recently and it is worth exploring for a minute: The Jews knew they were and are God’s chosen people, the nation with whom God made His covenant promises. And many believed that one day the Jewish nation would have worldly power and control, so they believed their Messiah would be a warrior or great powerful leader, whilst others believed there would be another powerful king from David’s line. They were thinking along earthly lines. But the Jewish people known as ‘the quiet in the land’, did not dream of violence or power, they were people of prayer who trusted and waited for God to act and deliver His people as He promised, by sending a Messiah. Being quiet in the land is mentioned in Psalm 35 verse 20 and in Lamentations 3 verse 26 it says ‘it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord’ And that is exactly what Simeon was doing

For he had been promised that he would not die until he saw with his own eyes the Messiah, God’s anointed one. And Simeon trusted in God’s promises and waited and watched until……… he saw baby Jesus that day and he knew that He was God’s Messiah. Simeon says ‘my eyes have seen your instrument of salvation, which you have prepared before all people, a light to bring your revelation to the gentiles and the glory of your people Israel’.

Simeon, the quiet of the land, who prayed and trusted God and waited, knew straight away on seeing baby Jesus that salvation had come. There is so much that we can learn from Simeon: in our noisy fast paced world, we need to have that quiet, that peace in our souls, that trusts in God and His promises. This brings us a type of calm and peace of mind that cannot be shaken, no matter what is going on – and which comes from being prayerful and from trusting God and in his love for us.

But Simeon’s blessing on Jesus comes with a reality check too. He says that because of Jesus ‘many will fall’. This is linked to Jesus saying ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’ and certainly today many reject Jesus, and in so doing they fall and do not follow Him as the way.

And he says ‘many will rise’, this is more optimistic – many will follow Jesus, many will be saved, given hope and have life, and life to the full. But Simeon predicts that Jesus will meet with much opposition. And as we know this is what happened – the authorities were challenged by the values Jesus preached and lived by, and it led to the cross and His death AND resurrection, it led to our salvation.

So at Candlemass we think of Jesus as the light of the world, and we his followers are called to shine with His light. The light that brings revelation to all people. We are called to shine in such a way that God’s salvation and love are revealed to others. Because if we, like Simeon, base our lives on prayer and trust in God’s promises, we will be different and we will shine with the joy of knowing that we are loved and have been saved by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.