

Candlemas,
Sunday, 31st January 2021



Dear Friends,

'Lord now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word'
(Luke 2:29)

Over the past week, I have been doing some late-night dipping into *'The Younger Longer Summit,'* which is an on-line series of commentaries from leading American physicians and academics looking at natural health responses to an ageing population. Run by Life Coach, Brian Vaszily, the Summit looks at 'effective steps people [can] take to look and feel their best and live long and well doing it.' The sessions I listened to were *very* American, with contributors taking an absolute age to get to the point of their talk (!), but there have been some helpful aspects which were worthy of note.

On exercise, it is clear that, even in a pandemic, we should all move more. Walking is one of the best forms of exercise we can do, but even if we are unable to walk, we should be stretching the parts of our bodies that we are able to move, in order to support our muscles as best we can. Frequency of exercise is important too. Ideally, we should spread exercise across the week, rather than racing at it in one go. The advice was to increase the minutes of exercise slowly, and then increase the diversity of exercise we can do. I was surprised by the emphasis placed upon the spine and posture in relation to the smooth functioning of our bodies. Evidently poor posture can take 15 years off our lives! We need to look after our spinal cord, which communicates messages from our brain to our bodies and affects the work of our vital organs. I definitely know I sit for hours on end, hunched over my computer and phone without being aware of the impact on my body.



Try this exercise: Slump forward, with your chin on your chest and slowly breathe in and out. Then, sit up with your back straight. Breathe in and out again. See how the good posture helps us breathe better. In this way, we get more oxygen to our body! Message to self - start by holding my mobile phone up at chest height!!



'Journey with Jesus' by Mike Moyers

The most intriguing aspect of the Summit, for me, was the conversation I listened to on Mind-set. Evidently, a healthy mind-set is key to healthy old age. The mind is naturally in a constant search for inputs and outcomes. What we give our minds has an effect as to how our mind-set is determined. For example, focusing on an achievement and telling ourselves we are failure if we don't reach this goal is the worst thing we can do for our mind-set. We are encouraged to train our minds to generate a healthy and positive mind-set. Here are a few pointers for doing so:

1. Set affirmations and recognise the mind's ability to generate negative and cynical responses.
2. At the end of each day, celebrate the positives - what has gone well? Even if we haven't achieved a particular goal, spend some time valuing what we have managed to achieve and count it as a blessing.
3. Write these positives down. There is evidence to support that writing a journal helps our minds to absorb a positive attitude, especially to accentuate the blessings.

It also became clear that having an active faith life is one of the most positive things we can do to stimulate a positive mind-set, and to give us a clear purpose and direction in our lives, especially as we move into older age, where our bodies might not be so agile as they once were, but our minds are as fertile as ever. As I have always believed, the power of prayer helps us to feel connected to God, and to play an active part in the mission of His kingdom here on earth, even if we are confined to our homes by Coronavirus, or our beds by ill health. In our service before the Lord, everything counts. Even the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Who knew?!

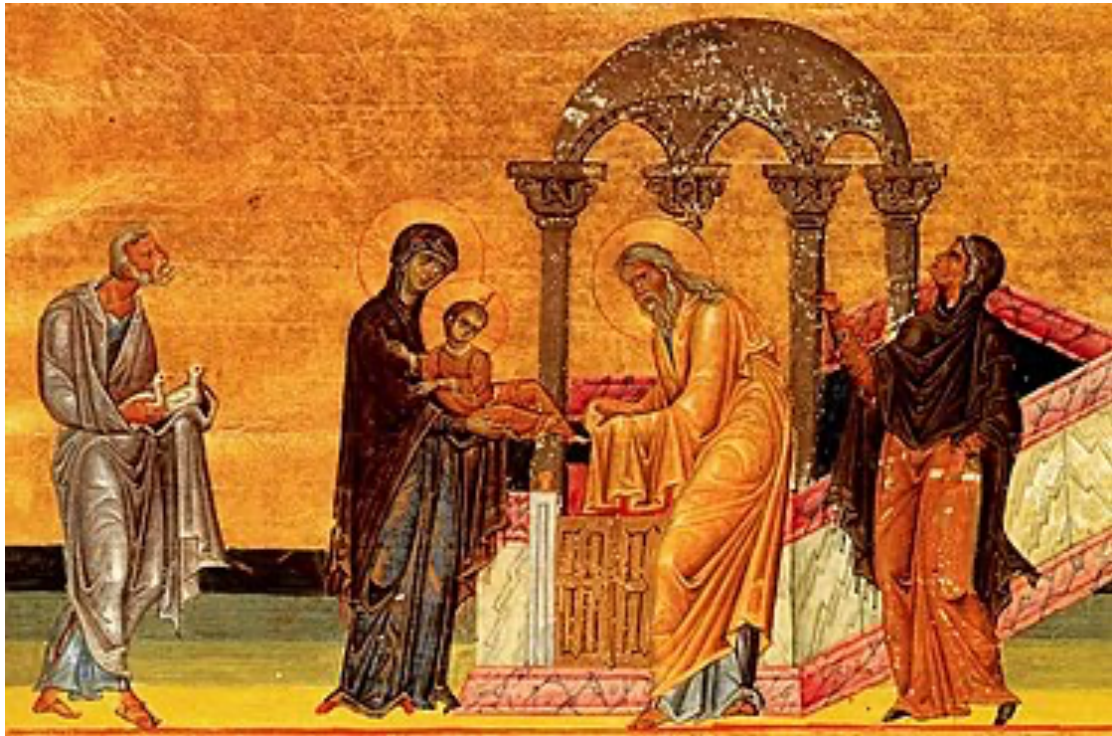
As I listened to these pearls of wisdom, I reflected on how Simeon and Anna are perfect examples of a healthy mind-set. Their faith kept them young! These two biblical characters are an important link to our celebration of Candlemas this Sunday. After forty days, of the Christmas and Epiphany season, Candlemas offers us an important turning point in our Christian year.



'Anna at the presentation of Jesus'
by Giotto di Bondone

Candlemas is a feast rich in meaning. Forty days after the birth of Jesus, we mark the ritual purification of Mary at the Temple; the corresponding ritual presentation of the baby Jesus before God, and, as He is greeted by Simeon and Anna, we find a bitter-sweet revelation of our Lord Jesus as the Light of the World *and* as the suffering Christ. We also see the cost of obedience to God in the almost hidden remark by Simeon to Mary that *'a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.'*

Though we are nearing the end of Epiphany, Candlemas teaches us that we have a little more to learn about sharing of God's love with the world. It is as if we say 'One last look back to Christmas, and now, let's turn towards the Cross!' Candlemas is the last important childhood *'snapshot'* of baby Jesus before we pack away the crib, the shepherds, the wise men and the star for another year ... and yet Candlemas is packed with similar stories of unlikely people coming to find Jesus – the extraordinary shining through the ordinary!



Part of an illuminated manuscript designed as a church calendar or Eastern Orthodox Church service book (Menologion) that was compiled c. 1000 AD, for the Byzantine Emperor Basil II

In today's Gospel story, we find a poor couple entering the great Temple, carrying their little baby boy. There was nothing obvious to mark them or Jesus out as special. And yet Simeon instantly recognises this infant as the promised Messiah. He tenderly picks Jesus up, and utters the beautiful words we know best as the Nunc Dimittis, "*Lord now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.*" It is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to a God who is faithful and keeps his promises. It is also an acceptance of death as part of God's plan for humanity – Simeon embraces *his own* death and praises God.

This story illuminates the extraordinarily faithful lives of ordinary people, and is as pertinent to our world today as it was when Mary and Joseph arrived with the Christ-child at the Temple: a poor couple with their new-born baby, insignificant by the values of the world, are the very ones carrying the hopes of the world in their arms. Their faithfulness is mirrored today by the many, such as NHS workers, Teachers and Refuse Collectors who quietly just get on with serving others.

In the light-filled story of Candlemas, we have the wonderful power and majesty of God hidden in ordinary life. Jesus is brought to the Temple, and no one notices. No one sees anything special until Simeon steps out from the crowd. Then there is Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, an old woman who has been a poor widow for most of her adult life. Again she sees instinctively what the priests and holy men have not observed. She takes Jesus and praises God. The great hidden in the ordinary! It took the faithful mind-set of two others, also invisible in the Temple community, to see the truth.



'Presentation of Jesus Christ at the Temple' by Hans Holbein the Elder

Candlemas gives us a glimpse as to how God works! God the Creator comes to His people hidden in his own creation. As you read this, I pray you will also glimpse that you too are part of that same Divine creation. God is here now, at work in our lives: not always noticed, but active nonetheless. If you can, go and look at your image in a mirror. Don't stand and criticise the imperfections you see in your own careworn face. Instead, look at what God has created in you. Gaze upon the wonder of God in you – for through the Holy Spirit, He is right here in each of us, you and me both!

God is in us, and it is the holiness of our lives that will attract people to faith. I saw that in the example of Michael, Lord Shaw of Northstead, whose funeral I had the privilege to take at St Catherine's, Littleton this past Wednesday. At the great age of 100 years, Michael is outlived by his beloved wife of almost 70 years, Joan, and their three sons, to whom he was devoted. Michael was also a dedicated Parliamentarian and public servant to the people of Yorkshire, to whom he devoted his political career with great integrity.

Above all else, Michael's faith in Christ underpinned his whole life. He understood, like Mary, that to truly follow Jesus in the way of unconditional love was costly, yet this was the life he embraced in compassionate service which shone from his soul like a star in the night sky to the glory of God. As we gave thanks for his great life and generous spirit, we entrusted his soul to God, knowing that, like faithful Simeon before him, Michael's reward was to be face to face with the Lord he loved and served so well.

Michael's example shows us that God is hidden, yet He shines out through the way we treat one another. It is the way we love and care for one another and for those we meet which brings God to others; in the generosity of spirit through which we welcome people who are different to us and reach out to them where they are. It is in all of these things that God is hidden but still felt.



'A Host of Angels' by Mike Moyers

Candlemas reminds us that, just as the Wise Men travelled on their epic journey to find God in the great blue yonder, we can also find Him right here and now in the seeming ordinariness of our own lives.

God is more often in the places that 'normal' earthly wisdom would never consider. Like a Messiah in a manger; the Light of the World wrapped up in the arms of a carpenter. God is at work in the generous and vibrant churches of the Downs Benefice. Not so much in the buildings, though I do believe they each embody a sacred element of God's grace, but in the true meaning of what it is to *be* church: in its people. It is the holy saints in ordinary bodies that need to be exercised physically and spiritually to keep them alive, both on earth and for eternity. Church comprises a host of angels in holy bodies just like yours and mine!

Yours, brought alive by Christ,

Jax

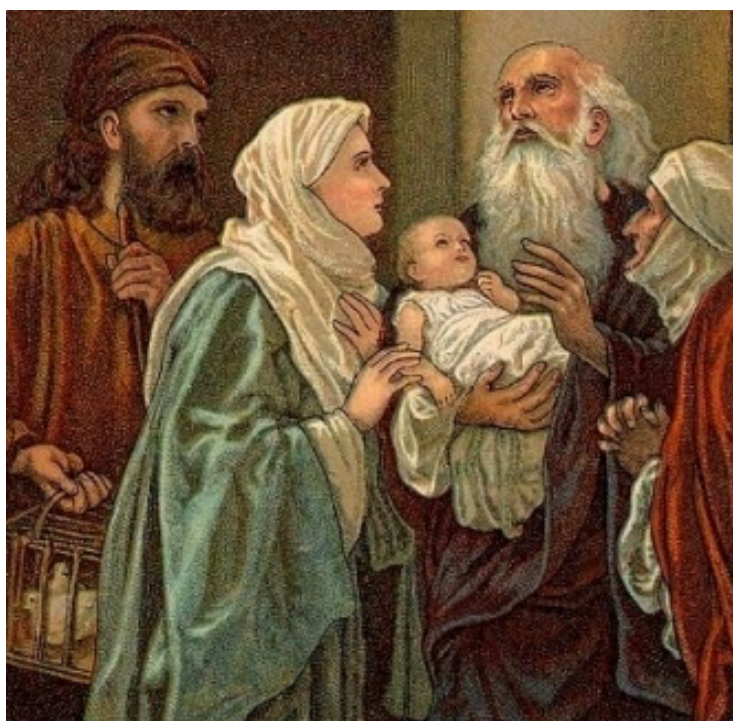
Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

After much prayer, and in response to the ongoing threat to public health of the new and virulent strain of COVID-19, our Benefice of five parishes has decided to suspend in-Church services until further notice in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus.

Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

This Sunday, you will find a recorded service for Candlemas on our Website and there will be more to come from our wonderful Ministry Team as we journey into February and Lent, beginning with a Café Church video next week.



Collect Prayer for Candlemas

Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple,
in substance of our flesh:
grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts,
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.



*'Simeon's Song of Praise'
by Rembrandt*

Luke 2: 22-40 – The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (KJV)

And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord; And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fasting and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.