

## SERMON FOR CANDLEMASS

31 January 2010

I do not propose to say terribly much this morning. The liturgy for Candlemass almost speaks for itself – starting as it does with the darkened Church and the Paschal Candle emerging in the silence: we *wait for your loving kindness, O God, in the midst of your Temple* and ending with the gentle words of Simeon – *Lord, now let your servant go in peace: all is well, all has been accomplished.* Into the quiet, the dark and the ordinary, comes the Redeemer, *the glory of your people Israel.*

Just as Simeon and Anna, waited patiently for the unexpected arrival of the Christ, something significant is happening among us too: hopefully, we are also becoming more and more aware of God's unfolding revelation – and so we too are invited to make our sacrificial offering to God, not doves or two small pigeons, but the control of our free will. Can we allow ourselves to be changed by what we see and hear today? In the East, they call Candlemass the 'Festival of Meeting', recalling the moment when Jesus offered his whole life to his Father for the 1<sup>st</sup> time. Can this be a momentous meeting with God for us too?

The story of the Haitian girl who survived for almost three weeks with just tap water and no food made me think about the last time I was really hungry. I don't mean just peckish but that gnawing hunger when you feel weak enough to think you will faint if you don't eat something at once. Somehow, when you feel like that, you really can't think about anything else.

It is that single-mindedness that has led (at least in one corner of the Church) to the phrase, 'having a hunger for mission', a term coined by the well known evangelical preacher, Robin Gamble. What he is trying to describe (albeit in shorthand) is that overwhelming desire to share our faith with others – a desire so strong that nothing else gets in the way.

It is not a turn of phrase which I would naturally use but it does give a kind of urgency and energy to what can be a rather *I know I ought to be sharing my faith but I don't think I have the confidence* kind of response. Part of our commitment as followers of Jesus is to find ways of sharing the Good News of his love and care for all; but do we really have a hunger for it?

**A moment's thought will remind us of some of the great moments in the Bible when people were hungry and needed to be fed: and on every occasion God provided for them in quite miraculous ways. Among the stories which are probably coming into your mind is the time when the People of Israel were wandering in the desert after their release from slavery, when God provided manna; or the time when Elijah promised the widow of Zaraphath that her little jar of meal would not run out during the famine if she fed him, or the most spectacular of all, Jesus feeding the 5000 after a day's teaching, far from shops or homes. Jesus' changing water into wine, which we thought about together a couple of weeks ago, is part of the same tradition.**

**In each case, the people involved were desperate - and God responded with his own solution and his own generosity.**

**Today, with great joy, we license and commission three new Eucharistic Ministers – Kate Butchart, Maria Flavius and Grace Hoskin. We do so at Candlemass because they too are presenting themselves to God, humbly and openly, offering their services to the Church *in the midst of his Temple*.**

**And they come as the ambassadors of God's divine grace, the bearers of his most holy and wonderful food. Through their almost silent and invisible ministrations we will be enabled to receive grace upon grace. In their hands they carry the light and the glory of God. What once had been seen by Isaiah in the Temple, what had purified the sons of Levi, what had fed the people in the wilderness or been shared by the 5000 – what we believe had hung in agony on the Cross on Good Friday: that is what they bear in their hands under the veil of bread and wine.**

**As Michael Kwatera reminded us: *This is the Blood of Christ*; this is the Lamb – this is the Son of God.**

**And the pressing question that we must ask on occasions such as this is not: are Kate, Maria and Grace worthy of the ministry they carry out on our behalf but - do we want to receive what they offer? Are we actually hungry for the food they bring to us?**

**That is why we need to hear, through Prudence in the first reading, the words of Malachi: *who can endure the day of his coming; who can stand when he appears? He is like a refiner's fire.***

**And our response has to be: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.* At a stroke, as we use that phrase of the Centurion, with its mix of faith and humility, our focus suddenly changes - from the Christmas and Epiphany wow, *look what came to us in Bethlehem*, to the Lent and Passiontide themes and to our sad lack of hunger for the pure light that God offers.**

**For however much this sacramental food is available, Mass by Mass, it is only in the sacrifice of our lives, our freedoms and our wills that God can remove our hunger and our emptiness. In our hearts we know that without this food we will be starved. That is why I want every adult here (and every child old enough to discern the Body of Christ) to be communicant members of the Church: we need feeding with the Bread of Life – and we need it often. Only in that way can our lives be challenged and our agendas reset by this infusion of his presence: *Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more.***

**Vitally we also need to feed on him *in community* because, like Simeon and Anna, it is only when we are creating these sacred assemblies that the real tests come. We can all be perfect on our own; it is only when we are in one another's company that we discover what we are really like! That is what we are saying to Sophie and to Laura too, as they revive the acolyte ministry at St James' today: *may the Lord bless your coming in and your going out.* Be one with us: experience the power of God in communion with your brothers and sisters in his holy Temple.**

**And learn to need him; to want his food; to seek and to find him in this Church which we believe to be the Gate of Heaven. For as we find ways to *Let go and Let God*, as we learn to submit our wills to his perfect will – and yet do it in partnership with all those next to us who have also been called along the pilgrim way with us – so we too will be able to sigh alongside Simeon as he says with such perfect resignation: *Lord, let your servant go; I have seen your glory.* For it is the same glory, the same cup of salvation, which is carried by each of our Eucharistic Ministers.**