

**St. Albright's Church, Stanway, Essex**  
**800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.**  
**Feb 7<sup>th</sup> 2010**  
**Lord Carey of Clifton**

I want to begin my address by thanking Fr. Paul for his invitation. It is good to be back in Essex where Eileen and I grew up and in a diocese where I was called to the ordained ministry. It is splendid, too, to share in this celebration of the faithful ministry of this Church over 800 years! What times this church has lived through – the new conquerors of England through the Normans, the Black Death, the Reformation, civil war and the normal vicissitudes of parish life. We give thanks for those who have served so faithfully down the years – priests and people, churchwardens, choirs, organists and so on. Mind you, I am left mystified by St. Albright but find his or her name rather entrancing! Whoever he or she is, we are called to be ‘all bright’ Christians!

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or Candlemas, as it is also known. The actual date is, of course, Feb 2<sup>nd</sup> but it is good to celebrate it at a main Sunday service, and especially good for an 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

But what a curious mixture of messages, superstitions and customs we find when we study this day!

As for superstitions, not so long ago sailors were reluctant to set sail on Candlemas Day, believing that any voyage begun then will end in disaster. In England, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, if you heard funeral bells tolling on Candlemas Day it was said that someone in your family would die very shortly.

As for customs, in France Candlemas (la chandeleur) used to be celebrated with crepes which had to be eaten after 8.00pm, and if the cook could flip a crepe whilst holding a coin in the other hand and standing on one leg, the family was assured of prosperity throughout the coming year! Now, there's a challenge for all of you on Shrove Tuesday!

Why Candlemas? Simply because in the Roman Liturgy this day of Presentation is the day when the celebrant blesses the candles for use during the rest of the year. But why it is associated with the Presentation of Christ in the Temple is anybody's guess!

What can we say about the Presentation of Christ in the Temple?

From the earliest days the Church has seen this day as a significant element in the story of Jesus. Here we are 40 days after his birth and the shadow of the cross begins to fall. The custom in Israel was that every mother and child would present themselves to their local synagogue or go up to the Temple at Jerusalem. Our churching of women – alas, a dead tradition now- was based on this custom. Mary and her son now humbly present themselves before the Lord with their gift of two doves; a gift that shows their poverty.

And there in the temple a dramatic meeting takes place as mother and baby meet two very old people.

In this encounter something was revealed, something was seen, and something was understood.

**Something revealed.** The word ‘revelation’ in the bible means something like ‘the penny dropping’. Something is viewed in a different light and something is discovered. That experience is far from uncommon. Think of when you were at school struggling with maths and that equation was so puzzling; you couldn’t work it out. Suddenly, the penny drops. Got it! Things like that have happened in all kinds of professions. Think of the discovery of penicillin where a bizarre accident and genius combined. In 1928 Alexander Fleming, on returning from holiday to his work in St.Mary’s Hospital, while working on the influenza virus, found that a mould had developed accidentally on a staphylococcus culture plate in the laboratory. The mould, he discovered with some puzzlement, had created a bacteria-free circle around itself. He was inspired to further experiment and the active substance he called penicillin. What had happened? Well, while Fleming was away on holiday he had left a Petri dish unwashed, and whilst on holiday there had been an exceptionally cool nine day period which would have favoured the growth of the penicillin mould. Without the nine day period and the unwashed Petri dish Fleming might never have discovered penicillin.

But of course, that strange accident would have been only that, if it had not been accompanied by a brilliant mind, actively trying to combat disease and waiting, waiting, waiting for the solution. The same goes for many discoveries. The next time you visit the radiologist or have any treatment for cancer, say a brief prayer of thanksgiving for Marie Curie and her husband, Pierre, who literally died in the attempt to find a use for what became the x-ray. Everything that is valuable in life today started as an idea and through imagination, a leap of faith and commitment, the idea became an event. So it is when ideas take root in human life.

Do you remember the old adage?

“Sow a thought, reap an act:

Sow an act, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

So a character, reap a destiny”.

We become what our dominant and passionate ideas make us. Now, there is something for our superficial culture to pay attention to.

So in the temple something was revealed to two old people- Simeon and Anna. They met the Christ, just as we have in many different ways and, for some, very possibly through the ministry of this Church.

**And something was seen.**

What did they see? Something very ordinary, actually. Just as Fleming had seen bacterial mould forming on Petri dishes many times before, so Simeon and Anna had seen thousands of young mothers and babies pass through the Temple. What did they see? We will never know what led to Simeon picking out Mary and Jesus. What we can be sure of is that it was no random accident.

There is no doubt in Simeon's mind that this young child is going to be, one day, God's chosen Messiah and Saviour. As Simeon reflected on the baby more intently, he saw two other pictures which he described as a **sign** and a **sword**.

A **sign**, he said, which was a 'light to the gentiles'.

How we need light these days on the great problems of our hour! I recall someone saying years ago that our age needs *light on the mystery of life and power for the mastery of life*.

Light and power. Think of public life and the spectacular fall of prominent people. Think of the scandal of Parliamentary expenses. What a wretched and sordid matter. Think of John Terry and his behaviour. Clever, successful and able people but essentially weak people; light and power. Yet none of us can pat ourselves on the back and say that we are exempt from temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. We are not and never shall be. That is why churches are so important – to remind us of what we are and what we are called to be.

But Simeon says an interesting thing about this sign. He says to Mary that this child will be a sign that '*will be spoken against*'. Spoken against. You see, darkness hates the light. Wherever God's justice, peace, harmony and goodness reside will also be the place of war, because evil hates goodness. Perhaps this explains in some part why the church is suffering so much and why its mission is so tough. Perhaps that is the reason why the modern era has seen more Christian martyrs than ever before. Perhaps that is why when we really live the Christian life we have the strange feeling that somebody doesn't like it!

So you can see how in the tradition of the Church, this festival of the Presentation looks ahead to Lent and the approach of the cross. We are halfway between Christmas and Easter- suffering awaits the child.

Simeon also sees something else and turning to Mary says 'A **sword** will pierce your own soul too'. Like Son, like Mother. The Presentation, by the way, hallows Mary as much as Jesus and reveals the suffering of the mother, not forgetting Joseph who is a shadowy figure in the background. 'A sword will pierce your own soul too'. I imagine that there can be few sorrows worse than losing your own child before yourself. I know that has happened to others and it may be a comfort to them to know that this was Mary's fate as well. Of course, it was the experience of the late Queen Mother who bore the death of her daughter Margaret with enormous courage some years ago.

However, personally, I cannot say or sing Simeon's Nunc Dimittis without a lump in my throat. Some 44 years ago I was a young tutor at Oak Hill Theological College and Clive Skinner was one of my students. He would have been about 22 at the time and was a bright, lively and outgoing student. Then we heard with horror that he had cancer in an advanced stage. He faced his own death with extraordinary faith. I had that humbling privilege of assisting him in his last days and then, with Archbishop Bishop Trevor Huddleston, I officiated at his wedding in Middlesex Hospital. By then he was merely hours away from his death. A few days later in the College chapel his mother and father, his lonely bride and his many student friends sang Simeon's Song in the modern version 'Faithful vigil ended; watching, waiting cease; Master grant your servant, his discharge in peace'.

I have often wondered what kind of priest Clive would have made. I am convinced he would have been quite outstanding, and such tragedies sets one wondering why some of the finest and noblest of people are taken away from us at the onset of their lives. We shall never know, of course, but here in the Presentation story, as well as something being revealed and something seen – something is understood as well.

### **What was understood?**

I am drawn to the image of ‘waiting’ in the passage. Simeon and Anna were very old people who, we are told, did nothing other than wait for the messiah to appear. What a waste of lives, we might think when they could have been raising families, having fun, enjoying life and so on! Well, they might have responded ‘but our lives were not pointless, but rather filled with the joy of the Lord’. Simeon was waiting because the passage tells us ‘It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ’. He was waiting with a purpose. And so was Anna. Now 84 – a very advanced age in those days- she was waiting too and the moment she saw the infant Christ, she knew that her waiting was over.

You may know the story of the old lady reading her bible. Her student grand-son passed her room jokingly said: ‘Swotting for your Finals,eh Gran?’ I wonder what retort she made. She could have said ‘No, I passed that exam long ago. I am waiting for my presentation in the Temple of the Lord. No panic, no alarm. Just confident’.

So perhaps the Presentation teaches us several things- the importance of waiting for what God has to reveal, of waiting for what God wants us to see and waiting for what God wants us to understand. It’s worth it.

And in the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this Church, it is worth waiting for also. We live in tough times for Christian people: cynicism in our land runs very deep and blindness and deafness towards the Christian message are all around us. But never underestimate the power of God to bring something surprising out of people of faith. And we must never underestimate the power of God to continuing this Church to bless the lives of those who, like Simeon and Anna, are willing to wait. Whatever our age, whatever the circumstances around us, this Church and each one of us are signs of God’s presence in the world. Our job is to bear witness to the One who is a light to Gentiles. To be ‘All Bright’ Christians; confident, that though everything around us will fade with time, the good news of Jesus Christ remains.

That is why we are here and that is what we celebrate today.

George Carey