

10.00 – Mattins - 30th January 2011
Candlemas – Year A

Exodus 13: 1-16

Romans 12: 1-5

This morning we celebrate 'Candlemas', and this evening we celebrate 'The Presentation of Christ in the Temple' when the preacher will be the Very Reverend Dr. Jeffrey John, Dean of St. Albans Abbey. No doubt more will be said about 'The Presentation', but this morning I want to concentrate on – Candles. Firstly, how many of you were aware that St Mary's was candlelit till 1911 ? so this is our centenary year for electric lighting. For over 800 years only candlelight was used in this building, to help people see and read what they were doing.

Let me tell you a story: Back in the days before electricity, a tight-fisted old farmer took his hired man to task for carrying a lighted lantern when he went to call on his girl friend. 'When I went a-courting young ladies, I never carried a lantern. I always went in the dark.' 'Yes,' said the young man, 'and look what you ended up with.' Nowadays, almost the only time that St. Mary's is candle-lit is at Christmas time, and Carol services and Midnight Mass would 'not quite be the same' without that flickering light. So what about some more specific candles ?

Altar candles seem to have existed from about the twelfth century, but why two candles ? In Luke's story of the 'Presentation of Christ at the Temple', Simeon recognises Jesus as the Messiah, and he says the words that we now call the Nunc Dimittis: "**Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples. A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.**" Simeon had not only seen the Messiah, but had also held him in his arms. In other words, the long-promised Messiah was not only divine, but was also human. And so our two altar candles remind us of the two natures of Jesus; Human and Divine.

Let's move onto The **Paschal, or Easter Candle**. We light this candle at the Easter vigil service each year, as a reminder that the light of Jesus has defeated the darkness of sin. Now if you notice, this candle isn't as tall as it was. What has happened to all that wax ? As the candle gives of itself so that we might have light, so Jesus gives himself on the cross that we might have life. Remember those words of the Nunc Dimittis ? "**A light for revelation to the Gentiles.**" Jesus was called the Light of the World, and the Paschal Candle represents the Risen Christ's resurrection on the third day, Easter Sunday morning, the Light of the World shining out over the world. So the Paschal candle promises hope. But in offering us a better life, Jesus inevitably shows us that our existing lives are not all they could be. For some that is deeply attractive, but for others it is terrifying, even offensive. "Some people change their ways when they see the light, others only when they feel the heat," wrote someone called Caroline Schoeder.

There are all sorts of decorations on our Paschal Candle - a cross, the year, 2010, and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega. At this time of the church year we only light it for baptisms or funerals, the beginning and the end, alpha and omega. Later today Becky will be lighting two **Baptism** candles from this Paschal candle. Near the end of the Baptism service, these smaller candles are lit and are given to the baptised person, or their parents if it's a baby – with these words: "**God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has given us a place with the saints in light. You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life.**" And everyone then says together: "**Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father.** I suppose that psychologists would call it an association of ideas, but to you and me, it's another link back to the Risen Christ, through our Paschal Candle, to the first Easter, to Jesus, the Light of the World.

And then there's our **Prayer** Candles. On a Saturday morning, as well as on Sundays, we often have people walk in, go to these candles and light one. They don't really want to talk to a human being, they just want to talk to God, to express their needs and their brokenness to him, and their longing for his light to break into their darkness. I'm sure many of you have also lit candles here, to bring your own longings and your prayers to God. You'll notice that in our church, as in many others, the prayer candles are next to the statue of Mary, Our Lady. This is to remind us that when we pray, we don't do it on our own. We pray as part of the family that Paul talked about to the church in Rome, with our friends on earth and our friends in heaven such as Mary, praying with us and for us.

We obviously have other candles that we use here in church, and maybe on another day I'll tell you about them. But they all remind us of Jesus as the Light of the World, and of our job to spread that same light out into the world around us.

Let me finish with one small, new candle, sitting on the altar. This has on it the words that you'll be hearing more about in the coming months: **Living God's Love**. And underneath that are three themes.

Based upon those themes, I'm finishing with three questions, that are posed by the Bishop of Hertford in the February issue of See Round: **How does what we already do take people deeper into God's love, and how can we do that better ?** **How does what we already do help to transform our community, and how can we do that better ?** **How does what we already do bring people to follow Christ, and how can we do that better ?**

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, help the candles in this church to remind us of you, and help us to take your light out to a world in darkness.