**Candlemas 29th January 2012 8am**

Malachi 3. 1 – 5
Hebrews 2. 14 – end
Luke 2. 22 – 40

Enlighten our hearts, Lord, with the flame of your presence and open our eyes to discern your glory. May the words of your holy Gospel fill our hearts with joy and may you speak through these, my words. Amen

Today is the day when our real celebration of Christmas comes to and end and when our focus is turned from the cradle to the cross and we do this in the company of Simeon and Anna. Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple. It is 40 days since his birth and this is the moment when they come for purification, the precursor of the now seldom used churching of women, and they come to dedicate their first born son to the Lord. But the scene focuses on Simeon and Anna, these two elderly people, two people who have spent the whole of their lives in worship, in prayer, in fasting. Both standing on the cusp between life and death, their eyes dimmed with age but whose capacity to see, to really see is unparalleled. And because they stand on this cusp between life and death their perspective ranges both backwards and forwards, backwards in time recalling the promise of the Messiah and forwards to both the glory inherent in the realisation of this promise and the consequences for the people and for Mary, his mother. So as we contemplate this wonderful scene there are three words I would like to focus on.

So first a word about glory. It is no chance occurrence that this scene takes place in the temple. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament the temple has been the place of God’s presence or rather the place where that presence is visible. If we go back to the book of the prophet Ezekiel we find the moment in chapter 10 when the glory of God leaves the temple and that is a moment of desolation because it means that God is no longer in the midst of his people. Then later in chapter 43 we have the wonderful moment when it returns, when right relationship is restored. It is this image that is being picked up here. The infant Jesus brought into the temple is bringing in the living presence of God, is bringing in that same glory. It is this glory to which Simeon bears witness. It is the glory that means the children of Israel have the possibility of being in right relationship with God, of God being in their midst, of hearing once again those beautiful words “I will be their God and they shall be my people.” Simeon whose life has been devoted to worship is able both to articulate this and to see it with the eyes of his heart.

Secondly a few words about judgement. This is not a word used in the passage from Luke but in a sense it is inherent in it, because judgement is about light. Judgement is about shining the light of Christ into the darkest recesses of our hearts, not with a desire to punish so much as with the need for truth to be made manifest, “so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” It is this about which our passage from Malachi speaks. The glory of God, the light of Christ, however one might like to express it, will act like a refiner’s fire or like fuller’s soap, rooting out all that is impure and contrary to the will of God. It is interesting that Malachi spells it out still further: it will root out those who are oppressors, who behave unjustly towards the marginalised elements of society. If one reflects on the life of Christ, these are precisely the people on whom Christ sheds his light pointing out their hypocrisy, their double standards. It is the marginalised whom Christ welcomes to his table. It is this same light that Christ sheds on us that we may bring for his healing those part of ourselves, be it our opinions, our actions, our thoughts that struggle to bear the test of Christlikeness.

So glory and judgement. My third word is salvation, quite a big word! I am not pretending this morning to be able to unpack salvation adequately because we should be here a very long time and it would involve a detailed discussion of all the possible models of atonement and that is for another time. But the wonderful thing about this scene in the temple is that Simeon and Anna both speak of salvation and the intense clarity of Simeon captures in his few words something of the essence of what this salvation will be about. Salvation is for all peoples, gentiles and Jews. Both Jews and gentiles will be brought into the ambit of God’s light and glory. There is the recognition that not all will be able to accept or receive it but it will not be something about which people will be indifferent. There is the recognition that the path will be a path of suffering and a path of opposition. And most poignantly, Simeon’s words to Mary point forward to the sword that pierces the side of Christ at the crucifixion and which must therefore pierce the heart of her who carried him in her womb and gave him birth. But in the words of Anna, for those who seek it, for those whose eyes are open it will be the means whereby that relationship with God is established for ever. It will be the means of redemption, this child will buy back for humankind that everlasting relationship.

So Simeon and Anna point us to glory, to judgement and to salvation. Standing on the threshold between heaven and earth they understand the nature of the child Simeon is holding in his arms more profoundly than anyone else throughout the entire earthly life of Christ. They stand in stark contrast to the religious authorities with whom Jesus comes into contact. They stand in contrast even to the disciples who, from time to time catch a glimpse of the true nature of the one whom they follow but who lose it almost as quickly. These two aged people, steeped in worship, steeped in prayer are richly endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit who has opened their eyes, dimmed as they are with age, to the wonder, the glory, the joy, the judgement and the pain of what has taken place, of what is taking place, of what will take place. They know that with the presence of this tiny, vulnerable, helpless child the Holy Spirit’s work at Pentecost has begun.

So as we celebrate Candlemas here today let us remember the light of Christ shining in our hearts, the light of Christ shining throughout the world and let us pray that the Holy Spirit may dwell richly within us that we may see the glory of the Lord that is round about us, that we may express that wonder and glory and that we, like Christ may shine light into the dark places and challenge the oppressor, challenge those who would drive out the alien and treat our fellow men and women with the compassion and love that mirrors that of Our Lord and Saviour, the child in the manger, the child in the temple, the crucified and risen one, the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Amen