

Candlemas

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Candlemas is an amazing festival. Originating back as far as the 5th century, it was the feast for blessing the candles of church, as well as commemorating the encounter of Joseph, Mary and Jesus with Simeon and Anna. It is the last childhood 'snapshot' that we have of Jesus. The next time we meet him in the gospels is in the same place: in the Temple as an Adolescent, confounding teachers and scribes, and then not again until adulthood.

But let us focus on Anna and Simeon, for they have both waited; kept their counsel, waited, and waited, and waited... I like their part in this aspect of the Christmas story, for waiting is what many of us must do. But there is an important distinction I must make here: that between waiting and dithering; of being patient and of being delayed. Let me say more.

Many countries have folk tales that rewrite the Christmas story in the vernacular. One of my favourites is Baboushka, a Russian folk tale. In this story, the Wise Men call on Baboushka, a toy maker, who is busy making toys for selling. They invite Baboushka along to offer a toy to the Christ child, but she says she is too busy, and sends them on their way. Later she regrets this, and decides to try and find the infant king on her own... but she is too late. The Wise Men and the Holy Family have moved on; the legend says that down the ages, you can hear Baboushka calling out for the Christ Child, scouring the land, looking for Jesus to give him her gift. The message is clear; don't delay – hurry to the crib.

Similarly, there is a Catalan Mystery Play dating from the 14th century, in which one of the star parts is 'the crapping shepherd'. This poor character, having been visited by the angels and told where to go, is desperate to relieve himself so takes a detour. But his delay is costly, and he misses the Holy Family too. In the staging of the play, he sits centre stage, crouching, with his trousers down at the bottom of his legs...a reminder to folk that nothing should hold us up.

But Anna and Simeon have not rushed. We are a full month on from Christmas. So why are they rewarded? 'Better late than Never' is a wise old English proverb, and probably goes some way to answering the question. For the virtues of determination, patience and waiting are rewarded. The tragedy of Baboushka and her Catalan equivalent are not the only side to the Christmas story. Good things also come to those who wait.

And isn't this the point of Candlemas? Part of the genius of the Christmas narrative is to make us journey to see Jesus – we need to go looking for him; seek him out; make an effort. But the gospel also tells it another way. To those who cannot move or do not know, God will also come. Later in the life of Jesus, Jesus will meet seekers, but he will also seek the lost and the

ignorant, and those who'd never thought of looking; he is there for them just as much. That's why I like this modern poem about Candlemas (Richard Harries, 'A Sigh for Anna':

I too was there, waiting,
 another black widow silent in the shadows.
 60 years waiting, Waiting for what?
 Years of yearning and longing:
 For beloved Phanuel who doted on me,
 Even though I wasn't the son he wanted.
 For those Asherite aunts and cousins always so
 glad to see me:
 all gone, gone so long.
 And for one in particular and those seven ripe years,
 The feel of him, touch of him, release of him, flesh of my flesh, bone of my
 bone,
 severed and cut away,
 To drop me dead in the dark well of waiting.
 Waiting for what?

They say I can see the future so
 They consult me on the wisdom of a marriage,
 The likely success of a deal.
 Now I see Simeon and his Song:
 see dear Tom too, but no Roman hyacinths for me.
 Simeon, such a good man, a kindly man, perhaps
 I should have married him instead of waiting
 my life away.
 Those three little faces out of my tomb, so deadly
 still; and all they might have been.

And now he says the time has come ... I saw the child myself.
 The sun shifted and I am big with some new birth.
 I see the city, the temple, the very earth and sky translucent with love, lit
 through with light eternal.
 I will tell them what I see.

Anna is old; Simeon's age is not disclosed, and he could be young. Of course, Simeon and Anna are not 'lost'; they bide their time, knowing their moment will come. They dare not leave the temple unless they miss their date with destiny. Others must journey; they must wait. And most of us, I guess, are a little in the middle? Here is a wonderful vernacular rhyme, called the 'Snail Christmas Poem':

Of Orient there were three snails
Who followed ancient Bedouin trails
To see the birth at Bethlehem
Their names were Nathan, Gar and Shem.
They crept behind the shining star,
The going slow, the distance far
And came just thirteen years too late
(the gospels don't record their fate)
But lucky Nathan, Shem and Gar
Were present at the Bar Mitzvah

Yes, better late than never. A gospel truth, if ever there was one. Anna and Simeon, who embody the wisdom of waiting, the virtue of patience, and the strength to endure, are rewarded for being there – for not deserting their post. According to Luke, Simeon blesses the child and the family, and leaves Anna to prophesy over the child.

So, Jesus has been brought to the temple to be consecrated as a first born male as the custom demands. But as with all such customs, the blessings flow both ways. Simeon and Anna are blessed just as much as the one they came to bless.

Strangely, it is here, in the temple, that Jesus begins his ministry. For here he is truly recognised as a light for both Israel and the world, and set apart by the faithful witnesses who have waited for him. The road to Calvary begins here: 'the falling and rising of many...and a sword shall pierce your own heart'. But meanwhile, in the darkness, the light shines. So, may God bless you with his gracious light and love this Candlemas - and shine upon you.