

February 1st, 2026

6.00pm Choral Evensong, All Saints Oakham

Malachi 3. 1-5, Luke 2.22-40

When I am on the preaching rota twice in one day, the temptation is always of course to preach the same sermon twice. However it seems more than a little silly to do so, when I guess the majority of you who are here were also here this morning. So something a little different tonight – Poems and pictures for Candlemas, which will be exactly what its says on the tin. Some words and images for us to reflect on this evening. We begin with “A Sonnet for Candlemas” by Malcolm Guite, an English poet, singer-songwriter, Anglican priest and academic, born in 1957.

They came, as called, according to the Law.
Though they were poor and had to keep things simple,
They moved in grace, in quietness, in awe,
For God was coming with them to His temple.
Amidst the outer court's commercial bustle
They'd waited hours, enduring shouts and shoves,
Buyers and sellers, sensing one more hustle,
Had made a killing on the two young doves.
They come at last with us to Candlemas
And keep the day the prophecies came true
We glimpse with them, amidst our busyness,
The peace that Simeon and Anna knew.
For Candlemas still keeps His kindled light,
Against the dark our Saviour's face is bright.

And that brings us to our first picture. This is a version of a painting of the Holy Family that has hung in the Vicar's Vestry for many years, and has, until recently, never been properly identified. Recent expert advice suggests it is a late 18th / early 19th century copy of a composition by Francesco Albani of between 1608 and 1610. It is believed that it was produced by a workshop in Italy, or perhaps the Netherlands, to satisfy the demands of those on the “Grand Tour” for devotional works. So whilst thus not of any great value, it does have an interesting back story. The picture below is somewhat more colourful version of the original. It is not a picture of the Presentation of course, but of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and some accompanying angels. We can perhaps think of it as showing the Holy Family as they try to make sense of things that have happened. The painting shows a somewhat pensive looking Madonna in a red dress with a dark blue shawl, The Christ child sits on a golden cushion on her lap, partly surrounded by a blue sheet. Joseph looks on from the right, with an open book in front of him, that seems to be placed on a stone chest or altar. Luke tells us, in relation to the events of Christmas

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart

And perhaps we can see in her expression something of the puzzlement and wonder of all that has happened. It may be that the directions in which the Madonna and her husband are pointing is of some iconographic significance - Joseph, in his contemplation of scripture pointing upwards to God, and Mary, with the Christ child on her lap, pointing down to earth, the direction, if that is an appropriate word, of the incarnation. Two angelic figures look on from the left. There is a figure carved on the stone chest, (or is it perhaps an altar or a tomb?) that, from the original, appears to be some sort of Bacchanalia, with wine being poured out for small dancing child like figures. Again there may be some iconographic significance here with the tomb indicating Christ's death, and with a representation of Christ's blood being poured out at the Eucharist. The mixture of biblical and classical themes seems to have been common at the period of the original composition. Something to ponder on perhaps.



Our next poem is by John Henry Newman, the Anglican-turned-Catholic theologian, academic, philosopher, historian, writer, and poet of the mid 19th century. It is entitled *Candlemas – A song*, and introduces us to the seasonal aspect of the feast, as a turning point in the liturgical year.

The Angel-lights of Christmas morn,
Which shot across the sky,
Away they pass at Candlemas,
They sparkle and they die.

Comfort of earth is brief at best,
Although it be divine;
Like funeral lights for Christmas gone,
Old Simeon's tapers shine.

And then for eight long weeks and more,
We wait in twilight grey,
Till the high candle sheds a beam
On Holy Saturday.

We wait along the penance-tide
Of solemn fast and prayer;
While song is hush'd, and lights grow dim
In the sin-laden air.

And while the sword in Mary's soul
Is driven home, we hide
In our own hearts, and count the wounds
Of passion and of pride.

And still, though Candlemas be spent
And Alleluias o'er,
The cross is music in our need,
And Jesus light in store.

At the end there, Newman refers to another verse from Luke, part of Simeon's prophecy, addressed to Mary

A sword will pierce your own soul too

That brings us to our second painting, of Mary and her dead son after the crucifixion. The lamentation of the virgin" in the Grandes Heures de Rohan, by the artist known as the Rohan Master. The grieving Virgin cannot be consoled by the Apostle John, and collapses over his arms as he holds her up. John looks up in consternation, and perhaps accusation, at a saddened God in a sky full it seems of angel wings. This is for me the most evocative representation of Mary's grief that I know – the sword piercing her soul. Emotional desperation and physical collapse. Again something to be contemplated at greater length.



We continue with the consideration of the seasonal nature of the feast with a poem by Robert Herrick a 17th-century poet and priest, Ceremonies for Candlemas Eve. But here the cycle of the natural year is as important as the liturgical year.

Down with the rosemary and bays,
Down with the mistletoe;
Instead of holly, now up-raise
The greener box (for show).

The holly hitherto did sway ;
Let box now domineer
Until the dancing Easter day,
Or Easter's eve appear.

Then youthful box which now hath grace
Your houses to renew ;
Grown old, surrender must his place
Unto the crisped yew.

When yew is out, then birch comes in,
And many flowers beside ;
Both of a fresh and fragrant kin
To honour Whitsuntide.

Green rushes, then, and sweetest bents,
With cooler oaken boughs,
Come in for comely ornaments
To re-adorn the house.

Thus times do shift ; each thing his turn does hold ;
New things succeed, as former things grow old.

Finally a more modern poem by Hilary Llewellyn-Williams on the death of her Father on February 2nd 1981. She refers to the festival as Brigid's night – the feast day of St Bridget of Ireland. being on February 1st. It is simply called Candlemas.

On Brigid's Night
there was rain and wind and miles of darkness between us;
there was a generation of pain between us,
but I stayed awake for love's sake, and because of the candles.

On Brigid's Night
spring was calling a long way off, below the horizon invisible,
but heard, like a changed note;
my ears attuned, I lit candles around the room.

My children slept
upstairs, bundles of summer. I was tight-strung
and humming. Nineteen points of fire
in a small room needed watching: I sat with them.

My eyes half-closed
I watched them burn all night, watched wax spill pools
and curl and flow, the flames dip low,
wrapped round in shadows, caught in the eye of light.

The night you died
I talked to you through webs of sleep,
recalling you in my years of childhood
solid and sure, filling the fiery spaces.

I slept at last
towards dawn, in a darkened room.
Slowly I woke to sunlight striping the carpet, the cold
little heaps of wax: and my children shouting, and spring

one day nearer
and bottles clanking outside, and a sense of peace
and freedom; then the shrill cry
of the telephone, which I stumbled up to answer.

And with that reminder of the hustle and bustle of the world in which we live, that goes on after Candlemas, we come to a close.