

## February 1<sup>st</sup>, 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 it 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 1981. She refers to the festival as Brigid's night – the feast day of St Bridget of Ireland. being on February 1<sup>st</sup>. 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 mom 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.