

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Readings: [Malachi 3.1-5](#), [Hebrews 2.14-end](#), [Luke 2.22-40](#)

Candlemas

2 February 2025

Today is Groundhog Day, or at least it is in North America. According to an old story, it is the day on which the groundhog, that large squirrel-like rodent, wakes up and emerges from his burrow after sleeping through the winter. Apparently, as the story goes, if the day is sunny and the animal sees its shadow, six more weeks of winter weather remain. If, however, the day is cloudy, it's a sign that the weather during the following weeks will be mild, leading to an early spring. Perhaps this year, one might wonder whether when the Groundhog wakes up to discover a new resident at the White House, it may choose to return to its slumber. Either way today is a tipping point in the year, when winter is still very much around, but spring is beginning to suggest that it's not far away.

Unsurprisingly then, it's a day that is marked within a range of traditions, including our own, for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or Candlemas as it's also known, sits at a key place within the Church's calendar. It's the final day of this Epiphany season - hence the nativity scene in front of the altar will be taken down after today – for we are at a pivotal point between Christmas and the events of Holy Week and Easter. As such it's the day when, if you like, we take one look back towards the crib, before turning our attention, not only to our Lenten journey and the cross, but also through it and beyond it to the hope of Easter. And so themes of birth, and death, and resurrection life are, in some sense, present within today's celebration.

Of course, if we take the time to be out and about in the natural world at this time of year, we can become immediately aware of these interweaving strands. Whether we find ourselves walking in one of our wonderful city parks or further afield into the wider countryside, we discover that the trees are bare, the ground is covered with decomposing leaves, and the scent of rot is about. There is a certain deadness at this wintry time of year, a real stripping back to basics.

Some years ago during late January, I volunteered with one of the wildlife charities at Lake Vyrnwy in North Wales. It often involved trekking around the local forests, repairing and replacing birdboxes ahead of the breeding season. And as a keen birdwatcher, I became aware of how much more I could see when there were no leaves on the trees. Not only could I look within them for avian life but also through them to what was beyond. There is a bareness to the landscape at this time of year that opens us up for a clearer, deeper and wider vision.

As we know, though, this bareness is only part of the picture; an essential part, for sure, but not the whole scene, because all sorts of things are also happening under the surface. In the decay and the death, nature is purifying itself, letting go of what will get in the way, so as to allow space for new growth to emerge; fresh life is preparing to break out from underground. And we might, in fact, already be seeing the pure white of snowdrops and the vibrant yellow of very early daffodils in the verges and the hedgerows around us, real signs of hope at this time of year.

And so to today's readings in which this theme of purification as a prelude to new possibilities features prominently. The Old Testament lesson from the prophet Malachi speaks of one who will come as a refiner's fire, a fuller's soap. In the context in which this is being written, the desire is to purify the people of destructive practices & social injustices. For Malachi, God is coming to clear the ground for re-birth to healthier ways & with it the emergence of a fairer society.

Whilst in the Gospel, we get a further slant on this theme. The Holy Family adopts the traditional practice following a new birth, going to the Temple for cleansing. As part of that visit, we find Mary, in her conversation with Simeon, being told how, as Jesus fulfils his purpose, 'a sword will pierce her own soul too'.

It's a reference to Jesus' death and the inevitable pain that this will cause her. It will be for her the most painful of lettings go, as she couldn't really take on board the extraordinary new life that will emerge from it, but as her Son's purpose comes to fulfilment, the possibilities that result from it are, of course, endless.

Now I'm very aware that any talk of 'purification' needs to be handled with great care. Within religious circles, it's a term that has, at times, been used to encourage disciplinary practices that have been very far from healthy, and it can easily be linked to feelings of unworthiness and self-hatred. Understood wholistically, though, where the primary concern is with a working through and letting go of those things that inhibit new growth, I think that it can still speak to us. For certainly, as we inhabit this pivotal time of the year, it's worth our while to reflect on what might be purifying or cleansing for us; to ask ourselves what will allow for the possibility of a clearer vision and the emergence of new life.

In practice, it might involve learning to live more simply or walk more lightly on the earth; it may be to do with exploring how we might allow ourselves to begin to forgive or be forgiven, or of seeking to let go of those things to which we've been unhelpfully clinging for too long; it'll be different for all of us and in the process we may find ourselves facing some hard questions, but as we are reminded, in that extract from the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ has shared our humanity; he knows what we are like and all of the challenges we face, including death itself. And as he himself was tested by what he endured, he is able help us in our struggles, inviting us into a process of repentance, forgiveness, transformation and new life.

Candlemas heralds the start of an extraordinary period of the year; the earth is pregnant with possibility. And the same is true also for ourselves. God longs for us to participate in a winter of shedding, of letting go, that we might emerge, seeing more clearly, living more deeply and demonstrating his glory as human beings fully alive. Amen.

The Revd Adam Dickens, Cathedral and University Chaplain