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A LIGHT TO LIGHTEN THE GENTILES

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Look at the gospel for the feast of Candlemas (February 2nd) – page 232 in the Prayer Book, St. Luke's gospel 2:22-40. It is a perfect example of what literary types call "chiasmus" – a figure of speech or (as in this case) a larger literary structure in which the sequence of words or ideas in the first part is inverted in the second. A typical example of this pattern might be symbolized thus: ABB'A'. The structure of the Candlemas gospel, however, may be represented as ABCB'A'. Here the chiasmus forms a double envelope framing a central passage (C). As we look at each element the meaning of the feast becomes evident.

The outermost element, A and A', (2:22-24 and 2:39) speaks of the compliance of Jesus' parents with the Law of Moses, in his presentation in the temple on the fortieth day after his birth, and his mother's purification after childbirth. This element acknowledges how from his infancy, Jesus began to fulfill the law by his perfect obedience, in offering and sacrifice and purification. Christ is the "end of the Law", "fulfilling all righteousness".

The next element, B and B' (2:25-33 and 2:36-38), move from Christ as the fulfillment of the Law, to Christ as the fulfillment of the prophets. For when his parents bring him into the temple, they are met by two aged saints, representatives of Israel's Old Testament hope, who recognize the child as the promised Messiah, and respond in worship and witness. Aged Simeon had been promised that he should not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ – and thus he gives thanks to God for keeping his promise, in the canticle Nunc Dimittis, which has passed into the Church's evening common prayers as an expression of a Christian's faith grounded in the word of God and fearless in the faith of darkness, night, and death: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation...a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel".

The light which was reflected, albeit dimly and obscurely, in the ceremonies of the Law now shines forth in the person of the Incarnate Son of God. It illumines the mind in faith, so that Simeon can perceive, recognize, and receive into his arms Jesus as the Light of the world. Likewise Anna, a pious widow of great age, "coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that

looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (2:38). Like Simeon, Anna recognizes Jesus as the Christ and gives thanks to God for his coming: and she then bears this light to others.

The ancient ceremonies for this day, instituted in the the 4th century, involve the blessing, receiving, and carrying of lighted candles in procession, and give the feast its name of Candlemas. The symbolism of this ceremony is evident: like Simeon, we must receive the light of Christ by means of faith, to light our way through the darkness of this world; and like Anna, we must bear that light to others, in word and deed.

At the centre of the chiasmus, between Simeon's worship, and Anna's witness, is the innermost element (C), a mysterious and troubling speech of Simeon to Mary: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against - yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also - that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (2:34, 35). The point seems to be this: the light that gladdens our hearts also dazzles, bewilders, and exposes things we would rather keep unseen. And so it is with the light of Christ: it is not always welcome, for it penetrates into the darkest recesses of our minds, and the thoughts of many hearts are revealed. And thus a sword of Christ's sufferings must pierce Mary's own soul, even as it must also pierce our own. Candlemas thus stands at the turning point between Christmas and Epiphany on the one hand - the coming of the light - and Lent, Passiontide, and Easter on the other - of judgment and redemption, "the fall and rising of many in Israel ". We pray that we might receive this light in faith and bear it to others in love: we pray above all that it might purify our hearts, that we not come into judgment. GGD

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