

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

High Mass on the feast of Candlemas

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Friday 2nd February 2018

I think I am right to say that Jesus will never have encountered a candle. Before Edison invented what we know as electric light, all light was fire – it didn't just brighten the view, it gave warmth and of course, came with the risk of burning. Jesus would have lived in a world illuminated only by fires for warmth and cooking (like the one in the high priest's courtyard on the night on which he was arrested), and oil lamps for reading and conversation (like the lamps which Jesus said would give light if put on a stand rather than hidden away). There are churches where, if you look closely the altar lights are not actually wax but are synthetic stocks with oil capacity for refill – terribly idle to my mind. And tallow is never allowed in church as being animal sacrifice which we don't favour. Wax for candles comes from bees and is the product of intensive and natural labour and they burn brighter and longer. The Gospel candle on the north never burns alone for it demands honour, but each and every candle is suggestive of the Light of Christ dispelling the darkness of unbelief and corruption.

Of course the religion of Jesus was more tallow than wax. He taught in both synagogue and Temple – institutions which do not sit together like Saint Mary-le-Bow and say Westminster Abbey; the Temple was not just a more splendid site of worship, but the place of cult to which all Hebrews looked for divine favour. In fact it seems that Luke (not himself a Jew) got his feasts mixed up in the Gospel. To present a first born son, Mary and Joseph didn't need to go up to the Temple at all; five shekels of silver would redeem a first born male from a lifetime of worship. What he is really describing is the purification rites of Mary following the birth of a child; which is why this has been a feast of Our Lady down the ages – two birds the sacrificial offering of a poor couple.

But what has given today its real character has been old Simeon's declaration that the little boy, held in the arms of his mother was destined to be the light for the Gentiles – the source of all goodness, the gift of God, the victor over all that is dark, half-hearted, evil and mean. That Nunc Dimittis has been set to music throughout Christian and especially Anglican history, and not least by Alan Wilson as we shall hear; though not strictly speaking a retirement anthem it has its resonance. What we can be sure is that old Simeon did not attempt to sing a note!

There were two daily services in the Temple, and a third in the afternoons of the Sabbath, the New Moon and festivals. Additionally this was a place of personal and family recourse with offerings for sin and thanksgiving. The smell must have been appalling for animal sacrifice was the hourly norm. The Talmud, the ancient source of legal interpretation, says that at one feast 600,000 pairs of kidneys were immolated; but less convincingly that there were (miraculously) no flies. It was not like Evensong; but it was very rigorously patrolled as to ritual – trumpets would blare (this perhaps the most distinctive sound) and cymbals would crash, the people would prostrate themselves and the Levites would sing the psalm of the day (actually just like Evensong). The officiants were priests chosen daily by lot, and the animals were carefully selected.

Jews have had a chequered history with performed music in worship; traditional orthodox thought insisting that since the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 (an act that some accounts suggests that

Jesus predicted) music should be restricted wholly to lament; but others have felt that after many centuries something of the full musical beauty of the Temple deserved to be recovered. The problems were manifold; music of course reads from left to right, whereas Hebrew text goes right to left. In 1622 an attempt was made to commission one Salamone Rossi (composing in the shadow of the likes of Monteverdi and Gabrieli) to compose polyphonic music for the Venetian synagogue. Many were outraged. Even further from the Temple period, organ music was believed first to be heard in a synagogue in 1810 in Westphalia; an innovation cheerfully (and still) loathed by other Jews.

You might think that here music has always been the backbone of liturgical life; after all at the end of the nineteenth century we were among the first to broadcast – by wire – services to some of the smarter hotels and a number of unplayable records in our archive testify to a lively musical life before the Second World War. Further back we know that there were two organs here before the Reformation; but as perhaps the centre of the most radical stream of the Reformation, everything musical and visual was stripped out in the 1530s and what was known here under Edward - and perhaps Elizabeth - was a pared down and probably rather Genevan worship – my predecessor John Joseph would be made apoplectic by almost everything we do tonight! We could run the lights on him spinning in his grave. For Anglicans worship without music would be as strange as worship without sacrifice would be to ancient Jews. In recent decades there has been a tendency to concertize (as a friend of mine has coined) liturgical music; to treat the music as more, and of more worth, than the actions of the liturgy. Not so here. But music is perhaps a species of sacrifice - as it is of illumination - and wholly the right thing to celebrate tonight. Music like the lifeblood is ephemeral – it exists as an offering for the moment, the subject of discipline and imagination and then it is no more, except as a memory if we will. And music illuminates words; drawing out their meaning and heightening their associations – a little boy asked here last week, why I sang so much of the liturgy. As St Augustine opined, to sing is to pray three times.

For some Christians (and also Jews) music is a confusing and potentially idolatrous distraction, less true than the pure word of the Gospel, and dangerously available to all. Yet faith is not some unmediated emotion between me and my maker, some privatized discrete response or some individualized choice of lifestyle. Faith is the assertion that what has held others, the memory of stories and rituals, holds us today – in the manner of music – not as an intellectual solution to every problem, but as a shared memory which bind us, binds us to those who have already navigated by the same light and will, God willing, continue to illuminate those who come after us.