

## CANDLEMAS

**Malachi 3: 1-5; Luke 2: 22-40**

**God is the Lord who has shown us Light; let us offer in his dwelling an oblation with great gladness.**

**What does it mean to have an encounter with God and what does it mean for us? And what's an oblation anyway?**

**When I was a wee boy I was packed off to Sunday School every Sunday, all dressed up, as people did for Church in those days, resplendent in kilt, sporran, the whole thing. You don't see that nowadays. I recently heard an interview with the late Ronnie Corbett and he had exactly the same recollections of Sunday mornings, heading off as a boy to Cluny Parish Church, and dressed the same way. Anyway, it was Corstorphine Old Parish Church for me, so off I went with a threepenny bit in my sporran for the collection. I don't remember what I felt about handing over my threepence, it was roughly about the same as I spent in Mrs Scobie's sweet shop, opposite the Church, every week, and I had no idea whatsoever what the minister did with my threepence.**

**Sunday school was pretty boring although we were led a dedicated lady, Miss Moncur, whom I still remember. It was all missionary journeys of St Paul – which have never got fixed in my mind to this day – and fuzzy felt shepherds, and a picture of Jesus surrounded by children of the world in all their national costumes. But on days we were actually in church, in spite of hour long sermons by the minister, there was an encounter, a sense of God in his dwelling. Corstorphine Old Parish Church is a beautiful pre-Reformation Church, with recumbent statues of knights laid out in full armour, and a window of Christ the Sower, every detail of which I can remember as it was the only thing to absorb my attention during those long sermons, that and the awareness of the single threepenny bit rattling in my sporran from which I would shortly have to part company.**

**But that there was, for everyone under that ancient roof, the possibility of an encounter with God, the peace of God, the love and forgiveness of God, participation in something greater, vaster than my very young self, I do not doubt. Because I felt it. So maybe that's why I parted with my threepence quite happily. Something immense was happening here, something wonderful flowed out from here – 'though I couldn't then have told you what it was – and I and my threepence were part of it.**

**The parents of Jesus arrive at the Temple to make their offering, their oblation, and they bring both the poorest offering they can make – this is a widow's mite offering – two turtle doves or two young pigeons, and the richest offering imaginable, their Son. Simeon has made his own lifelong offering of fidelity and prayer, faithful waiting, keeping hope in the face of everything that the Messiah would come, and instantly he knows his work is done. This is the encounter of a lifetime. Anna too has done a lot of waiting. She's been a widow for decades and she's offered herself, a prophetic presence in the Temple, always pointing to God, always hoping – and she does not miss the moment when it comes.**

**So as we come to the Temple what do we offer to the God who gives us nothing less than himself? Back at Christmas we sang, "What can I give him, poor as I am, if I were a**

shepherd I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man I would do my part. Yet what I can I give him – give my heart”.

This is, first and foremost, what God wants – that we draw near to him and seek his face, not just here, in the Temple, in Church, but daily and moment by moment, lying in bed or standing at the bus stop. He wants us to encounter him in the Temple of our own hearts, than which nowhere is more sacred, more holy. So the offering God most desires from us is hearts that seek him – at all times and in all places so that we know the priceless gift that he is for us.

And that relationship changes how we live our lives, how we treat each other, how we love, how we forgive, how we try not to lose hope and help others to keep hopeful too, maybe how we vote, and maybe indeed also how we use our money. Which takes us back to that threepenny bit in my sporrán.

Like I said, I had no idea what my threepence was for. Now, I know. My money offering, our offerings today, help to maintain the temple, the place of encounter, the place where we gather to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ every week, to witness to the power of the Resurrection. Among other things and crucially it supports the active ministry of the Church through enabling the minister to support people through good times and bad and to be an active representative for the Church and the Gospel in the local community. Everyone ministers, we’re all called to do that, and we do and I would say that the ministry of people to each other in this Church is one of the most inspiring things about our fellowship. But our supporting the particular ministry of the priest here is a vital element in our offering to God for the sake of the Gospel. And this is a time when we need to think deeply about this.

I say this, and I know you’ll understand this, having in mind whoever will follow me here because we stand at a pivotal point in our life as a Church. We’re growing (more than 10% growth in attendance last year) and with the prospect of moving into what will be an amazing new building, we’re going to have opportunities to serve our community for which we will need someone with as much time to help us exploit those possibilities as we can afford.

So I would encourage all of us on this feast of Mary and Joseph’s offering, of the offerings of Simeon and Anna, but most of all the offering of Jesus of himself to us, the Light of the World, to make the best offering you can – as you are able, and only as you’re able – but lovingly and generously in response to the generous God who gives us himself and gives us all things. This is the meaning of that threepence – it’s what we do in love. Please pray for our Church and pray for our future as bearers of the Light of Christ in Dunbar, but more than anything seek God in the temple of your own heart. Amen.