**SERMON FOR CANDLEMASS | 29.01.17**

**This week it was time to prepare the Church Bible Readings rota for the next six months – what readings shall we have on any particular Sunday and who will we ask to read it? And in case you think that we just take it straight out of a book sent down from on high, it’s much, much more complicated than that!**

**For a start you will have noticed that we have moved all the major weekday festivals like Ash Wednesday to the nearest Sunday because everyone is far too busy to make it to Church on weekdays. Then there are baptisms and All Age services when we only have two readings out of the usual three. But which one? This next Sunday, an All Age Mass, the passage given to us for Sam Lewis to read is really long and complicated and we will need to re-write it in a more comprehensible form so that it is easier for him to read and make sense of - and easier for us to listen to too.**

**And it was while I was wading through Sam’s lesson that I came to the early chapters of Leviticus – and found myself reading more about the background to today’s Candlemass festival than I really wanted to know. Because there, chapter after chapter, are all the rules and regulations about who could sleep with who and when, and all the taboos to do with blood and ritual cleanliness. In the most minute detail Leviticus spells out when men, but particularly women, are deemed ‘unclean’ – and the pots they drink from, the bed they lie on and the clothes they wear.**

**In particular, having gone through the trauma of becoming a mother, women were then forbidden to go back into society for at least a month if the child was a boy – and two months if it was a girl! *She must not go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.* And to achieve that, chapter 12 tells us, she is to go to the Tent of Meeting with a year old lamb and a young pigeon or dove. The priest shall then sacrifice these animals and make atonement for her. *And then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood…***

**So it was, forty days after his birth, that Mary and Joseph conform to what the law required so that Mary can be allowed to return to society once more.**

**And if you think that is thousands of years ago and off another planet, read the 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer and the ceremony often known as ‘the Churching of Women’. As a curate or trainee priest in the north east of England thirty years ago, this private prayer service – traditionally held at the communion rails - was still asked for by some older women who felt they couldn’t go out of the house until they had been properly ‘churched’ as the saying went.**

**‘Churched’: allowing people to come back into this holy place. How is that, somehow, all that unmentionable stuff – sex and babies and monthly cycles and all – had to be swept back under the carpet and atoned for by a priest and his holy words? To our ears it seems too archaic for words and yet these things are still largely taboo in polite company despite the fact, as someone said on Radio 4 yesterday, without them none of us would be here today!**

**And if that were not bad enough, the Church of England continues to be rent apart by the debate about whether women should have authority over men in Church; and by the debate about marriage, especially live this week after the House of Bishops has reiterated its belief that marriage is only a life-long union of one man and one woman. Yet just yesterday I sent back our acceptance of an invitation to the marriage of my second cousin Hannah to her female partner Kiera in deepest Devon, set for the week-end after Easter.**

**Am I right to go or am I defying the bishops/the Church? Do I have the legitimate right to challenge the notion that there is only one sort of marriage? Let me switch context for a moment.**

**Next Thursday, Bishop Richard Chartres will celebrate a final Mass in St Paul’s Cathedral to mark his retirement after a twenty year ministry as Bishop of London. The planning includes not just an elaborate service inside St Paul’s but also what he calls a ‘pop-up’ Cathedral outside, with a huge screen and various activities that will link those standing on the pavement in Paternoster Square with what is happening ‘inside the Temple’. Like Pope Francis, Bishop Richard has embraced tweeting, Facebook and the social media because he knows perfectly well that that is how most Londoners communicate these days.**

**All these plans are, actually, hugely appropriate as one of the hallmarks of these twenty years has been Bp Richard’s commitment to church planting and to pioneer ministries that give permission to explore the Christian faith in new and untried ways. So there is a Church on a barge, any number of Costa churches, Starbuck shrines and McDonalds missions. Prayers are said on basketball pitches and in sweaty gyms; there is a new prayer centre based in the LSE; Christian start-up businesses are offering new hope and sink-estates are finding volunteers willing and eager to tackle homelessness and deprivation as never before.**

**Instead of expecting people to come to Church, the Church is going out to them – wherever they are and whatever they are interested in. The figures for the London Diocese are extraordinary: 70,000 in Church on any Sunday of the year, 1000 clergy, 150 schools caring for 52,000 children, 200 training for ordination… it all sounds very impressive and in many ways it is.**

**But is there, in this hugely diverse mix, space for the ceremony at the heart of today’s Gospel? Let us recall again how Mary comes with her child to the Temple, to be purified and restored to the wider community. She would be one of many that day; it was run of the mill religious stuff, nothing out of the ordinary.**

**But when she gets there she is met by an old priest, Simeon - and also by the equally ancient prophetess, Anna; they have been waiting there for years. And what happens? Of all the children present that day Simeon recognizes the Christ child, the Messiah. And he comes out with these extraordinary words: *Lord, now I have seen your saving work; I have seen the one who will be the Saviour of your people.* And he goes on: *This child is destined to be responsible for the falling and the rising of many; he will also be the person who will reveal the true thoughts of those who hear him... and his life will bring pain as well as grace to those who trust him.***

**So my question is: in all the new developments that have sprung up in the Diocese, so many of which are powerful and good, will there still be space for the mystical, spiritual, unforeseen activity of God among all the busy-ness? Don’t get me wrong: there was so much that was wrong with the Temple system of Jesus’ day – and yet in that strangely outdated environment, Simeon knew the Messiah when he saw him.**

**You will see I have put a note into the pew sheet, reminding us of the need to pray for all those responsible for choosing Bishop Richard’s successor as Bishop of London. For all kinds of reasons his will be a hard act to follow. How will they keep together this huge, dynamic and very varied Diocese? Will they take a different view over the symbolism of ordaining women to the priesthood; will they manage to keep links with the well heeled as well as with the down at heel? To put it bluntly: can they hold us all together?**

**In our Candlemass ceremonies we traditionally light small candles, holding on to the ancient custom of seeing in the flames the image of the way the light of Christ meets darkness, fair and square, and gradually overcomes it. Today, we at St James’ have shared in that, passing the living flame from one person to another. And at the end of Mass we will do it again, standing around the Font as we leave Christmas behind, preparing for the more difficult journey of Lent before we light the big Easter candle once more and shout to one another ‘Christ is our Light!**

**These are not easy times yet celebrating Bishop Richard’s retirement at Candlemass is a smart move. It reminds us that if we look, we too can find Jesus in the middle of where we are and what we are doing – whether it is in a more traditional Church or in a Fresh Expression of Church. I think we are increasing finding that the style, the words and the music don’t matter very much.**

**What does matter is that we share a real sense of family whenever we are together. Just like our experience last week-end with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters inside St Paul’s, what divides us is so small in comparison with what unites us. Our views on marriage or sexuality or climate change or the economy, huge though they seem right now, are as nothing compared with our need to make sure our Temples/Churches – whatever their shape and size - are open to all, with as few barriers as possible.**

**And – and this is my central point - let’s abandon any idea that people need to be to ‘good’ or pure before they can come to Church. God purifies out of his love, not out of what we do. All we need is a candle, a sign of our trust that God is, as he was to Simeon, promising to lead us safely into the future: you and me, our parish – and also this great Diocese of London. May ‘Christ be our light’, light for the journey we are making – together.**