

Dear Friends,

February, when you will read this, always seems a bit late to start the year. I'm never sure whether to start with a "Happy New Year" greeting, even though I'm still writing quite early in January. It all seems so strange having to send New Year's greetings early in November when it is at least 7 weeks away. That's the joy though when working on the magazine, always a month in advance, our thoughts are so fixed on the future that we forget which day of the week we are in.

So Christmas is all put away, (though I did catch an advert for Christmas 2018 today on the T.V.) and the decorations taken down. I wonder if you got that date right? Twelfth Night is 5th January, but who's fussy about that? We tend to be one of the last to take them down; after all you could keep them up until 2nd February. However, that would test those who put them up in November!

So, why 2nd February? It is simple really as that is the day we celebrate Candlemas and that is the festival that gets its name because it is celebrated with lots of candles. We tend to keep it on the Sunday Evening before the date in a beautiful candlelit service. Candlemas is more properly called "The Presentation of Christ in the Temple." This is to remember that forty days after his birth Jesus was taken to the temple and presented to God. In doing so Mary and Joseph offered the poor people's sacrifice of two turtle doves because they couldn't afford a lamb.

To understand this, we have to go back to the Exodus story when the "People of Israel" were slaves in Egypt. The Israelites cried out to God for mercy and he sent Moses to help them. Though Moses asked Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to release God's people he stubbornly refused despite the sending of a number of plagues against the Egyptians. The last of these 10 plagues was the visit of the Angel of Death. During the night the first born son of each Egyptian family died, the Israelites only escaped because God had told them to daub the blood of a lamb on the lintels and door posts of their homes. When the Angel saw the blood he passed over those houses and the Israelite boys were saved. However, all Jewish boys through to the time of Jesus had to be 'redeemed' by the offering of a sacrifice, usually a lamb but for the poor a pair of pigeons or turtle doves. Jesus was being treated by Mary and Joseph exactly like any other first born son. The Presentation can also be called the "Purification of the Virgin Mary" because the Presentation coincided with the end of Mary's confinement after giving birth to Jesus.

Candlemas brings to an end the Season of Epiphany which is of course the second of our Incarnation celebrations. Incarnation refers to the fact that God came among us as a human being. It literally means God took flesh but these days I like the sound of 'God in skin' better. Of course the focus of this is Christmas, but it is no good leaving Jesus in a manger hidden away in a stable.

The Epiphany is celebrated on 6th January and is the beginning of a new season (that's why Twelfth Night is 5th January). We usually do this by recalling the visit of the Wise Men. Of course in a Nativity Play we put the visit of the Shepherds and the Magi together, but that's not really how it happened. The Wise Men saw the sign of the birth of a Jewish king in their homeland and would have started their journey at once. However, they would have arrived long after the fleeting visit of the shepherds. Indeed it might well have been as much as two years later, judging from the age of the boys Herod ordered to be slaughtered after the Wise Men did not return to report where Jesus could be found.

The season of Epiphany though is about getting to know who Jesus is. Epiphany means 'manifestation' or more simply 'making known'. In the story we reflect on how at his baptism Jesus was declared to be God's Son. We note the way he gathered disciples to instruct them about God's kingly rule and the way miracles, such as changing water into wine, were done by this 'human being'. You see it is vitally important that we understand who this man is.

Ah, but I can already hear you saying that Jesus was God, he wasn't like us. That's not what the Church teaches though. In order to become exactly like us Jesus left behind all his heavenly powers. He was exactly like us and that enables him to be the help he is to us. I like to put it this way, in living as one of us Jesus knew about being human, pain, hurt, loss as well as joy, love and the

wonder of life. Indeed it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that came upon him when he was baptised that he was able to do the miracles and other mighty acts. The exciting thing about this is that we too can be workers of miracles. When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, Jesus promised we would be able to 'do what I have been doing' and indeed 'do even greater things than these' (John 14 v 12), but that is another story.

Of course each time we write the date we are reminded of the Incarnation. Each date is counted from the birth of Jesus, which is why we add Anno Domini to each year. A.D. means 'The Year of our Lord.' So as we write or type the date we can make it a little reminder, a way of remembering Jesus came as one of us. Lived here on Earth, breathed the same air and walked around just like us. That is how much God wants us to know His love for us that He made Himself like us to convince us and so we would understand.

May the Lord richly bless you.

Robert