

"Christ Be Our Light"
Homily of February 2, 2003
by Fr. Brian Joyce

The question before Mass today was, "Why all the candles?" We have had a lot of interesting answers this weekend. It was VERY cold this morning, so a number of people thought I was trying to save on the gas and electric bill. Some thought it was in memory of the astronauts who died yesterday in that tragic crash, which is a lovely thought. But that's not the answer. Quite a few thought that I had planned it as kind of a wake.... for the Raiders, after last weekend. That's a good thought too, but not quite true.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, of Jesus being brought to the temple for the first time and being claimed "Light to the Nations." And, because of that, the Christian Church and tradition, for sixteen hundred years, since the 400's in Jerusalem and the 500's in Rome, have marked this day with candle processions, the blessing of candles, the carrying of candles, and in Northern Europe this was always called "Candlemas Day."

Now, that's why the candles. Why isn't it more familiar? I bet a lot of people don't know the answer. Some of you were here last year and we didn't do this, and the year before and we didn't do this. Why isn't it more familiar? The feast of the Presentation, Candlemas Day, always falls on February 2nd. Only once every seven or eight years does it fall on a Sunday. And then, you know what happens? The priests forget. In all my life, I have heard about Candlemas and I have never seen it celebrated. We have forgotten here in all the years I have been here. This year, I remembered. So, I said, "We had better decorate and we'd better celebrate it. And I had better know something about it."

So I went to the Internet. I went to a search engine, to Google.com, and I put in (And you can try this yourself.).... I put in "Candlemas Day." And I got over a thousand entries and every one of them was named, "Groundhog's Day." Now, it is not just a coincidence that we seem to have Candlemas Day and Groundhog's Day intertwined. The feast of the Presentation of the Lord always comes forty days after the birth of Jesus. That was the Jewish ceremony and Jewish law, forty days after birth. And forty days after Christmas is forty days into the eighty days of winter. It is the day that comes half-way through winter. Common folklore in Northern Europe has always been that if that is a sunny and clear day, then you are going to have a much longer winter, and spring will be slow in coming. In fact, in Germany, the saying always was,

When it storms and snows on Candlemas Day,
Spring is not far away.

But on Candlemas Day, if it's bright and clear,
Spring is not yet here.

And they checked this out by watching the bears. If the bears came out of their holes and saw their own shadows because it was a sunny day, they would crawl back in for six weeks. As the northern European and German immigrants moved to other lands they replaced the bear with the badger, and then with the hedgehog, and then with the woodchuck. And then a group of German immigrants came to Pennsylvania, and they chose the groundhog and gave us Punxsutawney Phil. And that's where Groundhog Day comes from, really Candlemas.

It's interesting how shadow and sun and darkness and light are always tied up with Christian celebrations, celebrations of our faith, celebrations of Jesus. We always seem to tie those two together, whether it's Christmas lights or Easter fire or Candlemas Day or, God help us, Groundhog Day! Light in the darkness.... Why is Christ light in the darkness? And what is the darkness we are talking about? Reminds me, a few years ago, we had a lot of bumper stickers that people put out, that said, "Christ is the answer." A lot of sarcastic people added, "What was the question?" What was the question?

Today's scripture tells us what the question was because, in meeting Christ, Simeon is not afraid to die. And in the Hebrew scriptures that we read, the author says Christ destroyed the power of death, and all these people who were feeling as if they were slaves because of the fear of death He set them free, and unlocked them. I would say "Death" is the question and the "Light of Christ" is the answer. We live in a society that is death-dealing and, as individuals, we are very much death-denying.

A death-dealing society.... This doesn't just go for the United States, but we look at our society and the huge number of abortions is one suggestion why we are easily death-dealing. How easily we go to capital punishment to solve criminal justice problems tells us we are death-dealing. The massive quantity of mass destruction weapons that we develop and produce and sell and spread around the world is another sign. And, even when we try to bring peace and safety and justice to the world, as we are trying to do in Iraq (That's the goal!), we move fairly quickly to instruments of violence and war.... death-dealing. As a society we seem to be very death-dealing. And yet, as individuals, we are very death-avoiding. I am reminded of the letter of the little boy to God. He wrote,

"Dear God,
What is it like when you die. Nobody will tell me. I just want to know. I don't want to do it.
Your friend,

Michael"

And yet the scripture tells us that Jesus destroys the power of death by unlocking us from the slavery that we have because of fear of death. There is a saying that when we die we leave behind us all that we have and we take with us all that we are. I believe that the teaching, the value, the wisdom and the example of Jesus helps shape and fashion who we should become, what we are as a society and as individuals, because that is what we are going to take with us. And the life and death and resurrection of Jesus tell us three simple but profound truths:

- 1.) There is more. It does not end here.
- 2.) God is always about bringing us together. We will meet again.
- 3.) What we call in Christian creeds, the Resurrection of the Dead, that who we are will not be lost, that we will take with us who we are.

We've had a lot of death around here lately. Yesterday, the tragic deaths of the seven astronauts on the Columbia. In the last ten days, it has been one after the other: Mary Mahoney, who was on our Social Justice Committee, usually came to this Mass, was on our Parish Council and a local realtor, and very active in the Democratic Party; Tom Grant who, with his wife, was on the staff of San Damiano Retreat House for years; Dallas Bailie, who I spent some time with before he died, and I described him as a Christian Buddhist, and he returned the compliment by saying that I was a Buddhist Christian; Ellen Street, who was among the "tent people" here in our parish when it began in 1951, who brought communion to the sick, who facilitated our faith-sharing groups; Rose Davi whose funeral was on Friday; Ken Chrisman, a long-time wonderful parishoner whose funeral was Saturday, Angie Bacigalupi who died this weekend and whose funeral is Wednesday; and many more, many more. And yet, I was able to visit and talk with some of them before they died and what was most remarkable to me was their sense of peace, their sense of peace. And, it is summed up best for me in the writing of another parishoner, Noelle Bonjean, who died a year ago November. She wrote about it and her husband, Paul, shared that letter with me and I want to share it with you. She wrote this when she knew she had terminal cancer and was nearing the end.

My will and trust are in order. The do-not-resuscitate paper is signed. The power-of-attorney for healthcare has been settled. I have no outstanding bills, and magazine subscriptions are renewed for just one year. The Neptune Society is ready and waiting for the call. And now I must get down to the business of dying. There are no specific instructions on how to go about this of which I am aware. Cardinal Bernardin's book, *The Gift of Peace*, has some good and worthy thoughts, but I find it difficult to equate my life with the holiness of that good man, although I read his book three times and do find comfort in it.

So here I am, on my own, going about the business of dying. I intend to die in

God's time, even though I have an arsenal of drugs that would hasten my death and good and loyal friends who have offered to help, should I choose that avenue. I will contact Hospice when the time is right. They will be there to comfort my family as well as myself. I will seek more intense spiritual help from the Church when the time is right. Of these things I am sure: that God is good, that God loves me unconditionally, that I am special to Him, and that He wants me with Him for eternity. (I don't understand the "eternity" part.) And I am not clear on my perception of heaven. But whatever and wherever it is, it must be better than what we have here. I ask myself often, "Why, if I truly believe this, do I poison myself with chemo drugs to stay alive?" And my answer is that life is precious, it is God-given and I love it.

I always prayed that I would live to raise my children. Not only has that been given to me, but I have seen the blessing of grandchildren too. My life has been so blessed with a good and faithful husband, devoted children and grandchildren, a supportive family and friends. So I feel ready now to say goodbye. And I take comfort in the words of St. Francis, "It is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life."

For Christ, the Light in the darkness, has broken the power of death and set us free from the slavery formed by fear of death. Let us give thanks to the Lord Who is so good.