

**SERMON BY MIKE COX  
BROMLEY PARISH CHURCH  
SUNDAY 29<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2017  
(CANDLEMAS)  
10:30 PARISH COMMUNION**

TEXTS:

Old Testament:	Malachi 3.1-5
Canticle:	Psalm 26.[1-6] 7-end
New Testament:	Hebrews 2.14-end
Gospel:	Luke 2.22-40

Although Christmas may be receding in the memory, I'd like to share with you a couple of presents I got. The first is called "Extreme Dot to Dot – Spectacular Places". As you can see it is really, very detailed! The other is "The Lord of the Rings Movie Trilogy Colouring Book". Lots of my favourite scenes to colour in! But it is quite humbling – I would not go so far as to say, "humiliating! – when two quite different people sum up your intellectual capabilities in the same way! "What shall we get Mike for Christmas? Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologica" perhaps? Or maybe the collected sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? No, I think we'll stick with the dot-to-dot and colouring books!"

Anyway, I'll come back to the dot-to-dot idea later. But it does suggest a certain orderliness and tidiness as you join the dots or colour between the lines. And, although the family may have a collective snigger at this, there is a part of me that enjoys order, tidiness, routine and so on. Today we celebrate one of the Principal Feasts of the Church – Candlemas, or the presentation of Christ in the temple. And, although preachers throughout the world will be talking about this, as countless preachers have done in centuries past, it is for me a great privilege to be preaching at this festival. For me, an extraordinary day in what may otherwise seem ordinary in its countless repetition both today and in years gone by. And that is part of what we are celebrating here today – the extraordinary amongst the ordinary, the ordinary becoming extraordinary.

Before we think about that some more, if I may come back to that idea of routine, as the church's calendar has always been the backdrop to my life, even if I was not always aware of it, or did not appreciate exactly what any particular service meant, or its significance. I went to boarding school and we had Michaelmas, Lent and Summer terms. Then I practiced law and we had Hilary, Easter, Trinity and Michaelmas terms. And of course, the church's year runs from Advent through Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, Lent, Easter and so on, with various festivals and occasions along the way. Until we return to Advent and repeat the cycle again.

Now, it seems strange to stand here in an attempt to be uplifting on the Feast of Candlemas and to talk about routine, cycles repeating themselves ad infinitum, and then about discipline, obedience and observance. It can all sound as if it is just that – routine, stale, boring, a big turn off. The same old, same old. That's the trouble with church, with Christianity, with faith, it's rarely exciting, often old-fashioned and, let's be honest, not very relevant. So don't stand there talking about terms, seasons and festivals, about a long ago event in some far away place.

I guess it's easy to see coming to church at times as a chore, even when you're a practicing Christian. I guess it is also sometimes difficult to make the commitment if you're not, but are thinking of taking those first, tentative steps to coming to church – the building may seem intimidating, the songs old-fashioned and you don't know anyone there.

We all crave the exciting, the new, the different, the challenge in our everyday lives, or in our search for meaning in those lives. But there is no doubt that coming to church week-in, week-out, building up over time, perhaps supplemented by home groups, Lent or other courses, prayer time at home – even the social interaction either informally over a coffee or at a social event – these make up the framework on which we build our faith, the structure to which we attach thoughts, ideas and experiences as we develop our faith.

Much like my dot-to-dot book, we start joining the dots, putting in lines, getting a glimpse of God's love here, his purpose for us there, perhaps seeing where prayer fits in that bit – sometimes it's slow, sometimes there's a revelation that hits us hard. Sometimes, we can't make out anything at all, no matter how hard we look - it's blurred, it doesn't make sense. But still we go on, our faith grows, our understanding grows and our relationship with God grows.

There's another way to look at it. It may seem that each service, each festival is the same, but we may have changed. And that particular service, or a part of it, suddenly seems different, because it shares our joy, comforts our sadness, lifts our weariness. The hymn that expresses that joy, that prayer after communion as the choir sings that comforts us, the moment of contrition and forgiveness as we feel the burden lifted that has weighed heavily upon us.

What can seem ordinary, becomes extraordinary at that moment.

And that's also the story that we see continuing here. Over Christmas we've heard of Jesus' birth and all the events leading up to that point. The story today starts with what seems routine, it involves obligation and probably unnecessary procedures, to be honest. We hear that it's the time for their purification (er, what?), it's according to the law of Moses (yawn) and they offer a sacrifice of two turtle doves or two young pigeons (I know pigeons are a bit of a pest, but really, sacrifice? How yucky!).

But it all shows Mary and Joseph's obedience to God, to his will, because, after all, the law is simply guidance that God has given us as to how to lead our lives. As we grow and develop in our faith, so the significance of what we are being asked to do grows and our understanding deepens. Even if we don't always understand, we are being obedient to God's will. Not the "look at me, I'm pious", type of obedience, the going through the motions sort of obedience that Jesus is later to criticize, but the trusting, vulnerable, loving obedience that says, "I'm not sure why I'm doing this, or what you are asking me to do", or whatever the situation in which we find ourselves. But "Here I am, Lord. I believe and trust in you."

Think of the Christmas story for a moment. An angel appears to both Mary and Joseph in different situations, one to tell her not only that she is to have a son, but he is to be the son of God, even though she is a virgin, even though she is not married. Joseph takes Mary for his wife, even though he is deeply troubled and thinks he should really be letting her go. But then they go to Bethlehem where Jesus is born, and there are all these wonderful stories, wise men bringing gifts for her son, and shepherds telling stories of hosts of angels praising God – and, so we are told, earlier in verse 19, that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Excited – yes, but at the same time unsure and scared perhaps as to what is happening.

Now, imagine how she and Joseph must feel as they do their duty by presenting Jesus at the temple, proudly, no doubt as any parent does, but dutifully as well, and here pops up not just Simeon but Anna as well, saying things which must have resonated with them given all that had happened up to that moment, yet still amazed also at what they were hearing. Both Simeon and Anna were old and had lived long lives of obedience themselves, righteous and devout, in Simeon's case and a prophet in Anna's. Anna had never left the temple, worshipping there with fasting and prayer night and day. Simeon had been told that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. But in both cases how many

long years, and what doubts, fears, weariness along the way? Perhaps none in their cases, but if it were me, or any one of us ... Can we be sure that our faith would hold up?

And what of Mary? Simeon's words must have astounded her, as Simeon realised that God's promise had come true, that he was now discharged from his vigil and could rest in peace. He tells them that this child is the savior of the world, the instrument of God's salvation, a child that is to not only to bring glory to Israel, but be a light for revelation to the whole world! And yet ... there's a but. Remember the earlier words of the shepherds that Mary treasured in her heart? Now Simeon speaks different words, troubling words, words that will pierce her soul like a sword. Whilst many in Israel will rise, many will fall. And many will oppose him.

How was this young woman to make sense of this all? What did it mean? Maybe she could not grasp all of this, large parts of her understanding were missing, how could this be ...?

All we are told, in the final two verses, is that they returned home, to Nazareth, where the young Jesus grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God was upon him. And, no doubt, Mary and Joseph continued their lives of obedience, dedication and devotion to their son, most of the time ordinary and every day, yet extraordinary at the same time. Whilst not quite in the same position as Mary and Joseph, how many of us lead lives that are extraordinary in their ordinariness, lives of apparent routine, service, commitment, obedience ...

So here we are, Candlemas 2017. Standing with many others today and who have come before. Each with our Extreme Dot-to-Dot books of faith, some more completed than others, perhaps coloured in here and there, but some bits missing, some connections missing. And even though we know the story, in differing amounts of detail, we come to church, pray, sing praises, worship, ask for forgiveness, laugh, cry – all the time in the hope of growing in our faith, in our love of God and the wonderful gift he gave us in his son.