

Candlemas

February 2nd is Candlemas, the last great festival day of the Christmas cycle, when we traditionally take down our Nativity Cribs in church and at home. Other names for Candlemas are The Presentation of Christ in the Temple and The Purification of Mary, because this is the day the Christian church commemorates the presentation of Christ in the Temple. It was the custom of the Jews, 40 days after the birth of a baby boy (60 days for a girl), to take him to the temple and present him to God, by way of a thanksgiving. At this point the women were brought to the temple to be purified, after which they were allowed to take part in religious services again.

Before the celebration of Candlemas was abolished in 1548, it was the day when all the church candles that were to be used during the coming year were brought into church and a blessing said over them— the Mass of the Candles. This included the Paschal candle used in the ceremonies for the blessing of the baptismal water at Easter and Pentecost. It was marked by one of the most elaborate processions of the liturgical year when every parishioner joined in, carrying a blessed candle. These candles would be lit during thunderstorms, or in times of sickness or to be placed in the hands of the dying.

Candlemas is, however, an ancient festival, drawing elements from pagan times. It marks the mid-point of winter, half-way between the winter solstice (the shortest day) and the spring equinox, and in pre-Christian times it was celebrated as the festival of light. Darkness was terrifying to earlier cultures and thought to be a time when evil spirits roamed free. Just think of the words of Compline beseeching God to 'Let no evil dreams be near nor phantoms of the night appear'. In pre-electricity times the darkness was indeed very dark, and a lone candle could make a big difference. I think of this every Holy Saturday when the lone Paschal candle is carried by the priest into the darkness of our church and the glorious moment when we take its radiance to our own candles. The light spreads and the church is transformed ready for the Exultet to be sung, the glorious hymn of praise to God and the wonderful work of the mother bees who provided the wax for the candle.

Candlemas was abolished as part of Edward VI's reforms in 1548, along with incense, ashes on Ash Wednesday, and palms on Palm Sunday. The Catholic revival of the 19th century brought these back into the worshipping life of those parts of the Anglican Church which like St Nicolas' value the Catholic tradition.

Candlemas carries great symbolism and reminds us all as Christians that Christ is the light of the world. We light candles not only to guide us in the darkness, but to remind us that it is Christ who shows us the way.

Catherine Ferguson
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14th century. The dreaming woman and the miraculous Candlemas procession: from Miracles of the Virgin sequence in the Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral