

About Face!

Feast of the Presentation

Jo writes...

As I write this, the celebrations of New Year feel like they took place much longer ago than just three weeks. The change of year in some ways is meaningless, for passing from December 31st to January 1st is really just the same as moving onto any new day. But, this particular transition between days seems to have something special about it – when there is a strong sense of leaving things behind and moving onto to new things. As we start a new year, it's as though we are doing an 'about face' manoeuvre – turning from looking back to looking forward.



A light to the revelation of the gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel

One poem that came to mind as I was thinking about this yearly turning point in our lives was “At the gate of the year” by Minnie Louise Harkins. This is well known to many as the poem quoted by King George VI in his 1939 broadcast.

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'

This is good advice when we face any change in direction – for God will always guide us even when the way seems dark and uncertain.

In February, in the church's calendar, comes another day when we do an 'about face'. On 2nd February Candlemas, also known as Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. On this day, we turn from looking back at Christmas and the celebration of Christ's birth, and instead look towards Holy Week and Christ's death. Candlemas is the time when we recall the day that he was presented in the Temple by Mary and Joseph, offered to the Father and shown to his people. At the Temple, Simeon and Anna both recognized him as their Lord, the one they had been waiting for but Simeon also tells Mary that through her son, a sword would pierce her own soul. This day has become a pivot in time for the church, a day when we do an 'about face' by turning away from thinking about the Incarnation and Jesus' earthly ministry to his death and resurrection.

There can be a temptation for us to keep our focus on Jesus life, his healing, his message of love, his kindness, etc.. His death is unpleasant and something we might prefer not to think about. However, to gain a complete understanding of who Jesus is, grasping both his humanity and divinity, we need to make sure that we hold the different parts of his life together. Candlemas helps us to do this by being a set point in the year between the two major festivals of Christmas and Easter when we are reminded that it's time to change our focus from Christ's birth to his passion. As Jesus started his ministry and moved closer each day to Jerusalem, he faced a time of uncertainty, a time of division between those who encountered him. He knew the necessity of putting his hand into the hand of God as he trod into the unknown and kept his face fixed on the cross.

Our world is also facing a time of uncertainty and many people feel that they are treading into the unknown. Whether or not you voted for Brexit, our country's future looks uncertain for none of us

actually know what leaving the EU will do to the economy or to our way of life. The inauguration of President Donald Trump has filled many with fear as he looks as though he will be unlike any other president of the USA. We also see right wing politicians in Europe seeking to take power. Of course, none of us know where this will all lead to and whether or not our world is heading for a better or worse future, but it is hard not to feel fearful. We can't just bury our head in the sand and ignore everything or keeping harking back to some glorious past. Together we need to fix our face towards the future and step into the unknown, putting our hand into the hand of God and let him lead. Along the way, our job is to shine with light of Christ – as the liturgy of Candlemas reminds us.

Reverend Jo Farnworth