

Pure

Malachi 3:1-5; Luke 2:22-40

In some Christian traditions today is known as Candlemas. It commemorates the presentation of Jesus as a child at the Temple, the purification of His mother, Mary, and is one of the oldest Christian celebrations, traced back to 4th AD Jerusalem. Another tradition is that whilst many take down their Christmas decorations on Twelfth Night, others wait until today, 40 days after Christmas. A final tradition is that people bring their candles to church on this day to have them blessed. It symbolises the blessing and gift of light from Jesus to the Church and to the world.

In this story the idea of purity and light come together. The pure, unwavering light of Jesus' love comes into the world to bring people to a place where they have to make a decision about Who Jesus is. In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, we declare what we believe are to be the guiding principles of our lives. In our lives, are we moving toward or away from God? Yet it is not as straightforward as that. "As much as we may wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying, and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows."ⁱ

The idea of purity is complex. Asking different people over the week what purity meant to them only underlined the slippery nature of the word. Purity can mean the essence, the core, the absolute fundamental of something; it can mean simplicity. People said water, but water is easily contaminated. People said light, but light is not pure. People said alcohol, well, it was Morningside after all, but there's a physical limit to how pure alcohol can get – about 95%. Some of you may remember the soap advert from the 1980s, the product was called 'Simple', pure and natural, and yet as soon as you use soap, you contaminate it, and you have to wash it to make it clean again. There is a more sinister side to the idea of 'purity'. In the early to mid 20th Nazi Germany worked on the theory of racial hygiene, or racial purity, in the appalling belief that you could mastermind a master-race, and eliminate races that had inferior characteristics. A week after Holocaust Day events it is good if painful to have that annual reminder of some parts of humanity's search for

purity being built on the destruction not only of Jews, but Slavs, Roma, the physically and mentally disabled and others. It remains a bitter irony that purity can be such a contaminated word.

In these recent years we have seen the rise of different quests for purity: some might argue the rise of veganism and the dietary experiments with different foods search after a physical and ethical purity in our world today. The theory is interesting, but what the long term effect of veganism on the human body will be is less than certain in the medical world.

Religion, the exercise of faith, also makes something of purity. The symbolic rituals around baptism, and washing, and keeping clean are found in many faith traditions. Not so very long ago it was the tradition that you put on your Sunday best, your cleanest, smartest outfits to come to church. That has its roots in the quest for purity, to be authentic and clean and unblemished before God; of making an effort in your faith to make it visible.

Thinking about purity, in its better sense, it seems to me that if we are not careful it can come dangerously close to the opposite of what it intends. Taken to extremes, purity can be unattractive and even repellent. It can be faintly ridiculous. Robert Burns' poem, 'Holy Willie's Prayer' makes the point all too clearly. The overly pious hypocrite (not unlike the pharisee in Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the tax collector in the temple) is so focussed on his own self-righteousness, his own rule-keeping and judgmentalism of others, that he cannot see the distortion of purity that he has become.

*“O, wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.”*

There are some people so focussed on heaven that they are of no earthly use.

Purity is not lasting perfection. The cleaned cup remains clean only so long as it is not used. But its purpose is to be used. The cleaned house remains clean only so long as it is not lived in. But its purpose is to be lived in. The pure life of faith remains pure only so long as it does not engage in working in the world. But its purpose is to work in the world. And that engagement, and that working, and that trying to make a difference can make faith less than pure. Faith has to move,

and shift, and adapt, and sometimes compromise, and always evolve, and frequently return to source for a scrub down, and go back into the world where it is needed. Pure faith is not meant to be kept clothed only in its Sunday best. Sometimes it needs to get grubby, and frayed at the edges, and torn, and then cleaned, and mended and repaired and brought to work again. Only in that way, I believe, can faith bring light, and be light.

“Our Christian ancestors would have been very excited today...It is forty days after Christmas and it is the feast known as ‘Candlemas’...It was the day when every parishioner was obliged to carry a candle and to offer it to the priest along with a penny...and after the service great feasts were held. Candles weren’t mentioned in the gospel, but they would be lit and burn all day and night before the image of Mary as a sign of devotion in remembrance of her purification. In our electric days we forget how precious candles were in medieval times. Their symbolism at the beginning of the month in the year that begins to drive the darkness away from our afternoons... It is easy to see why candles became the focus for today’s Gospel. At the heart of the story is an encounter, a meeting, between old Simeon and the baby Jesus. An old weary world meets a new, fresh life and the old man says that light has broken in, the curtains are drawn back on a defrosted way of being human. There is great expectancy in the story too – what will it mean...?”ⁱⁱ Then there is Anna, waiting and waiting and waiting for a sign of God’s hope. Day after day, month after month, year after year worshipping and waiting. Until that day, Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus, arrived. Did the old man Simeon pass Jesus to the old woman Anna, and in their old arms each cradled the light of the world, the hope they’d been waiting for, their old, age-encrusted lives momentarily pure and lit up because their faith had at last found its answer?

“Someone once said of the actor Dirk Bogarde that he wanted to be a star but he resented having to twinkle. Well, there is an obligation in Christian faith to twinkle, to light up and be seen and felt, in a world that can get used to living in a half-light. (You) are the candles of today...a sign of warmth rather than coldness, of light and honesty rather than deceit and shadow. It is your Christian calling. When the medieval church blessed candles and told people to take them home

through the streets and light them at times of fear and journey, I think they understood faith, its warmth, its light to the human fragile soul, only too well.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In this Church today, and in your lives, there will be women and men who shine and twinkle. They will not think of themselves as being particularly pure, maybe very far from it. But we know who they are. The kindly souls whose very presences lightens our lives and brightens up our dullest days. The gentle people whose soft words of encouragement keep us going. Whose little acts of kindness shine like light in our darkest hours. Whose thoughtfulness and compassion bring tears of gratitude to our eyes, who make us smile, who remind us we are not alone. Whose motivation is pure: pure generosity, pure kindness, pure love. Perhaps, looked at like that, we are not so far away from purity after all.

Shine! And if you can't shine, try to sparkle!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Fred B Craddock, Interpretation: Luke, p39

ⁱⁱ Mark Oakley, By Way Of The Heart, The Seasons of Faith, p33ff

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid p36