

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Candlemas

Sunday 4 February 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Very Reverend Keith Jones

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles...

Clergy and especially cathedral vergers know a thing or two about candles. They know about dodgy wicks and flaws in wax, about the mess created by side draughts, and how to rescue a guttering flame. These are among the off-stage secrets of every vestry. But all of us know that candles, which are of little practical use now, are simply beautiful, what the poet Sylvia Plath called the last romantics. Whenever luxurious houses or churches appear in films they are always illuminated by impossible ranks of candles. But I want to point out that they can represent for us the human soul, of how you and I are in the presence of God.

A candle is incomplete until it is lit. I remember at the age of nine, when I was in serious danger of becoming a pyromaniac, the head server at our church initiated me into the ritual of candle lighting; how you start from the south and working northwards. Just like the spread of the Gospel, he explained, and then he also pleased me with an explanation how to extinguish the lights in reverse order. I loved the smoke curling upwards as the snuffer was lifted and then how it ceased abruptly like a dying breath.

A candle like a human life is incomplete until it has been lit. Until then the candle is a stolid lump of opaque wax, waiting for its real purpose. So we need to be touched by what is not ourselves but the Holy Spirit, and then we become what we ought to be, what God has made us to be. The enchantment of a candle is how readily it takes fire and engenders its own flame, bravely aiming heavenwards.

Candles require stillness. In a draught they become pictures of anxiety and worry, as we might be if our taxi or our train is late or the gas bill has shocked us. In the same way, wise human beings cherish stillness. Holy people have a calmness under the bustle and ambushes of life. I don't mean that such people lack vitality, for they may be as full of action as I remember Dame Cicely Saunders was who founded the hospice movement or as full of joyful hilarity as Archbishop Tutu. But under their exuberance this steady happiness. So, like candles it is good for us to sense under the flickers and tremors the unfailing supply of God's deep, steady power.

Like candles, we are designed to shine. Candles need no effort to shine, for it is altogether their purpose. So the best human beings are those who are warm, loving and trustworthy not because they are obviously trying to be so, but who strike us as being simply like that. Unthinking people imagine that holiness is some kind of effort for them. Not at all. They are who they are. Like candles, they shine because that is their truth. If they do loving acts of service to a neighbour it's because they simply, simply can't resist the deep desire they have.

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Candles accomplish their gracious purpose by being consumed. They don't resist their melting and self diminishing. Each candle is a picture of love. So holy people are those think nothing of saving themselves but will do anything for the other. They hold nothing back. Jesus said he was always at work, burning always with the light that his Father in heaven supplied. In saying this, Jesus was entirely like the Father. The Creator of all pours all God is into the radiance of life-giving. How wrong are those who entertain the imagination of our heavenly father as of a grudging old so-and-so who would prefer not to be bothered and has to be cajoled or pressed to open his hands to us! God is all generous love. There is nothing in God which is not given as freely as a candle gives its light. The martyrs and witnesses to the goodness of God don't think twice about the cost. They toil but do not seek for rest, they labour but ask for no reward save that what God wants be done. In Auschwitz Maximilian Kolbe did not think twice about taking the place of another in the queue of victims waiting to be gassed.

The smallest candle is enough to change a darkened room from a place of danger to a space of security. As you and I are sent forth from this eucharist to live and work to God's praise and glory we may be all too aware of how tiny our contribution is to the healing of the world. The great tides of humanity in motion across the world, the daunting problems of climate, and the endless frustrations of establishing justice and mercy in human affairs can make us feel it hardly worth, we might say, a candle. But in a great room the smallest light in the distance can direct our path and correct our fears. This feast of Candlemas is given us to confirm our trust in God's calling to us to be sharers in the divine life and light.