

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



CANDLEMAS

2 February 2025

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Sermon by the Rt Revd Martin Seeley

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5; Hebrews 2: 14-end; Luke 2: 22-40

I am very grateful that it has turned out that my final service with you, as the Cathedral congregation, is on Candlemas. It is a great feast of the Church, the completion of the Christmas and Epiphany season, when we turn from looking back to the birth of Jesus to looking towards his ministry, death and resurrection. It's a hinge point, and today feels like a hinge point for me personally. I want to look back, but I know God is always calling us, all of us, to look forward. I want to look forward this morning.

I am enormously grateful that I am present for the blessing of the Kavelaer candles. I came late to the relationship between Kavelaer and Bury St Edmunds, and only made my first visit to Kavelaer in 2022, with Jutta, Matthew Vernon, Stewart Alderman, Geoffrey House and Lorna Brook. There we met and were feted by Fr Heiner Innig, and I am so glad he is able to be with us today, with Sebastien Piel and Lea Tigges. It is a precious relationship, particularly between the cathedral and the shrine at Kavelaer, which is the second largest Marian shrine in Germany. It is not just across our two nations and cultures, but between our two churches, an ecumenical partnership, and I have been very grateful for the warmth of welcome and engagement we have received on my now two visits. My second visit, this time with the Dean and Caroline von Nathusius, this last September was for the 375 anniversary of the Candle Chapel, where a candle for this cathedral and a host of other churches and organisations is permanently placed.

Candlemas is called Candlemas because of the phrase we have just heard in our Gospel reading, uttered by Simeon in what we have come to know as the Nunc Dimittis. "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" or in the traditional form, "a light to lighten the gentiles". The light that Simeon saw of course was the light who is Christ come into the world, as Simeon declares, for the gentiles – which means for everyone – as well as for his own people. It is a light that shines, that brightens, that illuminates, and I love that the traditional "lighten" means both brighten and lift the heaviness of the load. In a world that has become so heavy, Christ brings light and lifts the load. And just as Simeon saw the Christ child as light, light that lifted the burden of waiting and the anticipation of death, so Christ the adult turned to his followers and said, not just he, but "you are the light of the world." And that means us. We bear the light that is the light of Christ.

One of the ways we have described the ministry of this cathedral is as "A Beacon of Hope". A beacon is a source of light – we all have images in our minds of the beacons lit across the land for our late Queen's jubilee, and for the King's coronation. Light that conveys hope, gratitude, anticipation, even excitement. And the candles we blessed from Kavelaer are reminders, signs of that hope and gratitude, that anticipation and excitement of the light that in the birth of Christ has come to lighten everyone, and they call us to be bearers of that same light.

So looking forward, as I take my leave of you, I want to point to three ways I believe this cathedral is that light, and each of you as part of this body are that light. Three ways in which together you are a beacon of hope, are and have been, yes; but importantly looking forward, are and will be.

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First you are a beacon of faith. You bear the light of faith, and I mean that in an important way that runs counter to so much of our culture that wants clarity and answers. This is not a community of answers but first a community of honesty and openness, of questions, and exploration. Faith is alive in each of you, because you each, we each, engage with faith, actively, seeking, listening, learning, growing, attending to the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. We do that through our worship, our preaching, our courses, our conversations, the Edmund lectures, the educational programmes, our discussions and arguments. We will do that through the remarkable Abbey Heritage project – seeking, asking, wondering.

And we know we have doubts, and we acknowledge them. We are not daunted by those nor do we try to cover them up. Pope Benedict, in his remarkable book, *Introduction to Christianity*, reminded us not only to own our doubts but to recognise that atheists had doubts too, about their atheism – maybe it is true after all? So let's engage, ask, pray, and encourage – that is what makes and will make this a lively and attractive place for those who are disturbed by the narrowness of the world's self-referential answers.

Cardinal Lawrence, played by Ralph Fiennes, in the wonderful film, *Conclave* makes an extraordinary speech before his fellow cardinals and the nuns that were looking after them, as they wrestle with electing a new pope. "My brothers and sisters, in the course of a long life in the service of our Mother the Church, let me tell you that the one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery and therefore no need for faith."

You are a beacon of faith – of exploring, of listening, of asking, of wondering, of attending to the Holy Spirit of God who leads you into all truth.

In that same movie, *Conclave*, without giving the game away, I think it is true to say that that journey of exploring leads to the second way I see you as a Beacon. It leads to being a Beacon of justice, mercy and compassion. Cardinal Benitez, a little known Mexican archbishop secretly working in Afghanistan, makes a quiet and profound intervention saying, to my ears, the faith you are seeking is only found when you are connected to, engaged with, the pain and suffering of the world. Our worship, our pondering, our praying even, are illusory if they are not connected to the challenges of our own lives and the lives of those who suffer in this world, if they are not animated by hearts of compassion, mercy and justice. So the Cathedral's engagement in the Hope into Action housing homeless project; aiming to be a dementia friendly cathedral, the Yard project for at risk young people, participation in Black Lives Matter, commitment to the environment and achieving net-zero carbon, being a truly inclusive community – as well as the day to day pastoral care provided by ministers and congregation – all are about being a beacon of compassion, mercy and justice. These are not add-ons – these are the light of the lives we live by because they give light for others to live by.

A Beacon of Faith. A Beacon of Compassion, Mercy and Justice. And thirdly,

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A Beacon of Mystery. Our faith is faith in a mystery. Our compassion, mercy and justice are motivated by a mystery. The mystery of the one whom Simeon held in his arms and Anna rejoiced over. The mystery of one who cannot be constrained by dogma or doctrine, but who in being held in Simeon's arms, holds us all in his arms. The one we dare to gaze on, at his birth and at his death. The one we are drawn to more than to any other, who simply says be with me, and I will give you life. We are with this one who is mystery here, in our worship. We glimpse him in the wonderful gift of the music in this place. We glimpse him in the stillness and the calm of this space. We glimpse him in each other, in moments between us. And we taste him in the utter mystery of bread and wine.

Our world does not need certainty that draws boundaries, gives people positions and sets us apart. Our world longs for mystery that draws us together, out of ourselves, into being with each other in compassion, mercy and justice, being with each other before the one who is the source of all, held by Simeon in his arms, as in a moment we will hold this same one in our outstretched hands, gazing on God.

I am going to miss you more than I can possibly say. But I look forward to looking out from Cambridge, looking out towards the east, and seeing the light, the light shining from this beacon of faith, beacon of compassion, mercy and justice, this beacon of mystery, this beacon of hope.

God bless you. Thanks be to God.