

I've come to the Lady Chapel, beside the beautiful window of old Simeon and Anna, with Mary and Joseph, standing in the temple. Simeon is lifting up the baby Jesus in his hands - but if you look to the right, we have the station of the cross showing Jesus' descent from the cross, his body being again cradled in his mothers' arms. That is something of Candlemas - looking up to see Christ in our midst, and looking ahead to the journey through Lent to the cross.

As we come to the end of the Christmas season, our Gospel readings in recent weeks have shown us how inclusive Jesus is, how his birth in Bethlehem is good news for a rich diversity of people, who are now counted as God's own people.

Last week, in the story of the Wedding at Cana, we heard how Jesus turned the water in the six stone jars into wine. Once, water that was used to purify and set aside and exclude became wine that would unify a people as they shared in celebrating the great wedding feast.

Pat spoke last week about how this abundance of God's love and grace is a driving force for our care of creation, and our response to climate change, especially when Humanity's response has been, for too long, to damage and cause the poorest to be excluded.

And then today, we hear the story of Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. All the generations are present, young and old, stranger and family, rich and poor, those who had waited decades to know God, and those who had loved God for years.

As old Simeon begins to speak, we hear of a Gospel that is for Jews and Gentiles alike, a message that is about light, hope and a new start for all people and all creation.

In a year when we have been separated, a year that has divided us over politics and lockdown adherence, a year that has shown how poverty and unequal opportunities deeply divide our nation, a year when within our own church of England old wounds of faith and sexuality have reopened - Candlemas comes as a word of real hope in the darkness.

Jesus is the one who comes to end exclusion. He is the one who comes, arms outstretched on the cross, to welcome home the lost, the least and the lonely. He is the one who rejoices in our unique differences, and includes us in the story of God's love.

Even on the cross, he includes the thief next to him in his invitation to share in paradise - and on the lakeshore after the resurrection, Jesus longs to include those who'd betrayed and abandoned him.

You may have seen the meme - when you have more than you need, build a bigger table not a higher fence. In Simeon and Anna's prophecies, we hear of God building that table, big enough to accommodate the world. In the life of Jesus, we see faces being torn down, so that exclusion cannot survive.

What does that mean for us, scattered as we are? First is the confidence that Jesus wants us to feel included in the story of God's love, that this story, told across the generations, is about us too.

Second is to be like Christ, and ask who is missing from our table, to look forwards to build longer tables and break down the fences that stop people coming to church and sharing in the light and embrace of Jesus. Think and pray, about it...

And then please let us know how Christ Church can respond - how we can share this Gospel of inclusion, of table building, of breaking down fences in the years to come. Please fill in the survey, or give me a ring, or pop your thoughts in a letter or email. Because, like that first Candlemas morning, this is about all the generations gathering to see Jesus, and to be changed by God's love. Rich and poor, Gentile and Jew, old and young - the labels and categories may be endless, but Jesus includes each and every one in his kingdom. Amen.