**Life on the Frontline 4**

**On the Feast of Candlemas**

People don’t get dressed up much these days, do they?

But there are still one or two occasions when we might dust of an old suit or put on a special outfit… even get our hair done… at least when we are not in lockdown!

These may be occasions when we need to make a good impression – maybe for a job interview.

Or they may be occasions when something special is going to take place – maybe a wedding or a christening.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph got dressed up for the Jewish equivalent of a christening when they took Jesus to the Temple forty days after his birth?

This lovely episode, recorded in Luke’s Gospel, of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to Jerusalem, probably for his first ever visit, was in fact for two ceremonies which generally took place together.

One was the redemption of the first born. According to Exodus 13.2 every firstborn male, both human and animal, belonged to the Lord. Numbers 18.16 records a ceremony by which parents could pay 5 shekels and buy their son back from Him.

The other ceremony was the purification of a mother after childbirth. Women would remain ceremonially unclean for 40 days after giving birth and then were required to offer a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove for a sin offering. If you were too poor to afford a lamb, you could offer two doves instead (Leviticus 12).

Mary, Joseph and Jesus going through these important Jewish ceremonies is not remarkable in itself – untold numbers of Jewish families had been through them before.

We are reminded both that Jesus was born into a normal human family like you and I, and that he was born and lived a Jew – the fulfilment of all God’s promises made to the world through his chosen people the Israelites.

But as Mary carries her baby into the Temple two remarkable things happen.

An old man, Simeon, who has been waiting expectantly to see the Messiah is moved by the Holy Spirit to recognise Jesus as the One.

Simeon prophesies over Jesus that he is salvation sent from God; a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God’s people Israel.

There is a twist to the prophesy as Simeon forecasts that opinion will be divided about Jesus and that Mary will experience great sorrow as her son is rejected.

An old woman, Anna, also recognises Jesus as the one who will bring redemption to Jerusalem and she speaks to anyone who listen to this effect.

“A light to lighten the Gentiles”.

Light is a concept applied often to Jesus.

Isaiah prophesied that when God visited his people those who walked in darkness would see a great light (Isaiah 9.2)

John, in the great prologue to his Gospel described Jesus as a light coming into the world; one that could not be extinguished (John 1.1-9).

Jesus himself claimed to be the light of the world (John 9.5).

Light serves many functions.

It shows the way.

It enables work to be done.

It makes possible the growth of plants and people to be fed.

It provides safety as darkness and the evil that lurks there is dispelled.

Concentrated light in the form of a laser can cut through even the toughest material.

Jesus is the one who lights our way to God, enables us to live and serve God’s purposes, feeds us, keeps us safe and cuts through both the sin of our lives and the difficulties we face.

But Jesus of course said that his followers are like him, the light of the world (Matthew 5.14).

Like the moon reflects the light of the sun to earth, so we reflect the light of Christ to those around us.

Its not that we are light in and of ourselves, but that the light of Christ shines from within those who have invited Christ into their lives and streams out to those around.

As St Paul wrote, we hold a treasure in a jar of clay (2 Corinthians 4.7). Cracked and broken pots our lives may be, but Jesus shines through none the less.

We are currently working through the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity course, Life on the Frontline.

We’ve thought about what God might want to do in the places where we engage with the world, how we need to be committed to these places and serve, how we need to support and help each other in this.

This week we are thinking about what we might do in practice

Maybe we need to take on board the words of Jesus in the sermon on the Mount, the words that many of us will be familiar with from the Book of Common prayer exhortation before the offering,

*“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven”. (Matthew 5.16)*

To help us discern what this might look like in practice I want to point you to 6 ‘M’s.

I wish I’d thought of these myself, but I didn’t! They are from the book Fruitfulness on the Frontline, again from the London Institute of Christianity.

They are these:

1. **Model** Godly character – show Jesus in the way you live your life and relate to others. People will notice if you don’t swear and tell indecent jokes, if you refuse to gossip, if you don’t cut corners. They will notice if you speak words of kindness, build others up, behave with honesty and integrity… if you are prepared to say sorry when you get something wrong.
2. **Make** good work – like Adam and Eve in the garden, help creation flourish, whether that’s through farming, nursing, arranging mortgages, emptying bins, managing unit trusts, caring for elderly relatives, mentoring young people or cleaning the gutters in the village hall.
3. **Minister** grace and love. Most people’s lives are hard enough. Show compassion as Jesus did. Do something to help. It might be as simple as buying someone flowers, running an errand or offering to pray for them. Kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus was kind. We can be too.
4. **Mould** culture. Have you noticed how things changed when Jesus was around? A wedding celebration about to run dry ends up transformed into a massive knees-up. Sick people got healed and started leaping for joy. Storms are stilled. Of course, some people didn’t like Jesus, what he did and what he said. But faith in Jesus transformed a prison cell in which Paul and Silas languished into a house of praise. We can change the culture of the places where we engage with the world as we share the fulness of Jesus’ life.
5. Be a **mouthpiece** for truth and justice. Sometimes bad stuff needs challenging. Jesus wasn’t afraid to call out the scribes and pharisees who laid burdens on people’s backs without doing a thing to help them carry them.
6. Be a **messenger** of the gospel. Jesus invited all who were weary and heavy laden to come to him for rest; invited the hungry to come and be fed. We can invite people to come and meet Jesus and find in him the fulness of life he offers.

All along we’ve said that we want to look and see what God might want to do on our frontlines… and see how he might want to use us.

I don’t share these ‘M’s as a to do list - If you are a Christian you must do these – write them down and get on with it!!!

Rather I share these ‘M’s as some of the ways we will inevitably make a difference on our frontlines as we look to what God is doing and as we follow his lead.

Jesus is the light of the world. A lamp when lit is not hidden under a bowl (to use a parable of Jesus) but put on a stand where it can light up the whole room. Let’s allow the light of Jesus to fill our lives, and to shine through us, that all may see and be drawn to him.