

Looking back to look forward

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said, “life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” That is perhaps particularly pertinent on this day on which the year hinges, both seasonally and liturgically. Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, is the hinge of the liturgical year, the end of Christmas before a brief spell in ordinary time before the long cold shower of Lent. In a sense, on this day we are called to look back in order to look forward. And our readings encourage us in this, particularly with reference to the Temple, the location of today’s feast.

The prophet Haggai and his gaggle of strangely named contemporaries are in a quandary. God has fulfilled the promise of bringing them back from exile, of restoring the land to them, of rebuilding the Temple, destroyed when Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. There should have been great rejoicing. Instead, they are in despair, it is not as they hoped. Imagine if the walls of Berwick were destroyed and, in their place, a nice white picket fence was put up ... it doesn’t have the same grandeur, does it? There would be plenty of people around who would say, “I remember when ...” with the obvious inference that the present is not good enough.

Sung Holy Communion (BCP)
Candlemas
Haggai 2:1-9
John 2:18-22

That's where we find the prophet Haggai when God sends him to say, remember the former glory of the Temple, yes this isn't anything like it now, but the days are coming when the latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former. Look back, because there is a bigger future ahead.

And it's in a much grander Temple that our Gospel story is situated. Our brief reading comes as part of Jesus clearing the Temple which comes at the beginning of John's Gospel for theological reasons rather than the end of Jesus' ministry. John has Jesus play with the idea of the Temple as he answers the Jews' demand for a sign of authority from him. But John tells us that the disciples don't understand this episode until after Jesus' resurrection. They had to look back in the light of who they now understood Jesus to be in order to live into that future.

At this hinge of the year, you and I are invited to look back in order to look forward. We are invited to look back to Advent, Christmas and Epiphany and to remember the promises of hope proclaimed there and made present with us in the child Jesus. But in doing so we are invited to look forward with a new understanding. "The Temple was supremely associated with the glory and

presence of God, especially in the holy of holies, the sanctuary at its heart.”¹

John reminds us that it is now Jesus who is the Temple, who is the holy of holies, who is the presence of God and the place of encounter. Paul will remind us that after Jesus’ ascension we are the Temples of the Holy Spirit and that in bread and wine we encounter God afresh as the godhead dwells in us through our baptism. We look back in order to look forward.

As we turn with the season we do so to understand where God is at work. The priest-poet R S Thomas writes, “he is such a fast God, always before us and leaving as we arrive.” Candlemas is the feast that calls us onward, not settling down in a post-Christmas haze, but moving onwards following where God leads, looking back to live forward. And that journey will take us through Lent, through Holy Week, through the Passion and the Cross until we stand at dawn before an empty tomb, where Christ has left just as we arrive.

And in bread and wine tonight for a moment we catch up with God. For a moment we hold the past, present and future as we take Christ’s body and blood, caught up in the presence of the one who fills us as Temples and calls us forward; who promises that the future with God is bigger than the past.

¹ David Ford, *John*, p.72