

One of the results of the Reformation in England was the banning of the procession of candles on 2nd February, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, previously known as Candlemas. The ban was part of a package of prohibitions that also included ashes on Ash Wednesday and palms on Palm Sunday. By the grace of God, all this is now a thing of the past and we can delight again in some of the ceremonies that added such joy to the religious and civic life of our predecessors.

Of course, candles at Candlemas are merely symbols of the light of Christ, just as ashes are only symbols of our repentance and palms are a symbol of our welcoming him into our lives as the crowds did on the first Palm Sunday. As “mere” symbols we can use or ignore them as we like, but it is worth spending a moment to reflect on why we use them and what it is they point to.

As human beings we live in a world of symbols - after all, even the words we use are symbols of the ideas we mean by them. A smile, a scowl, a kiss or handshake, the symbols on an Ordnance Survey map, people curtseying to the Queen or recognising her image or the coins or stamps we use - it's all symbolic.

Some signs look quite like what they represent. Think for example of the road sign with two children to warn us of a school ahead. Others are more difficult. Who would automatically understand the meaning of a flag - for example the Royal Standard flying above Buckingham Palace to signify that the Queen is at home?

So, how should we interpret the candles at Candlemas? The great hymn of Candlemas is the *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon in the Temple (Lk. 2.29-35). Here Simeon speaks of what he has seen, God's gift of “a light to enlighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of God's people, Israel”.

Simeon saw in the infant Jesus the living light of God himself. Jesus was no reflected light (like that of the moon) but the flaming burning light that comes from the origin and heart of creation. When we carry candles at Candlemas we join Simeon in acclaiming Jesus as the one who brings light into our lives and who therefore enables us to “depart in peace” to whatever God has in mind for us.

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