

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Sarah Tinker
at Essex Church, 31st January 2010

Candlemas and Imbolc

Reading: 'Waiting to Be Discovered' (*written and read by Joy Croft*)

In the chill dark of winter earth,
beneath a mulch of dead, discarded leaves,
life begins again;

The seed, entombed, yet swelling with life,
gathering life in,
unregarded, waiting ...

In the warm dark of a maternal womb,
a life begins;
Cells dividing, then connecting – two, fore, eight,
reaching toward the intricate miracle
of human being;
Life, unrecognised as yet, though longed for,
waiting ...

In the dread dark of dead dreams,
where love is lost and vision cowed
by the injustice of injustice,
Even in such dull despair, even then
life prepares;
Fresh hope, new purpose spark alive
unnoticed, not even wanted then,
waiting ...

In the soft dark of letting go,
surrendering to meditation's hold,
Now neither seer nor seen,
Waits what was always there
though shrouded in our need and knowing;
Life of our life, within us, of us, waiting ...
always waiting to be discovered.

Sermon – by Rev. Sarah Tinker:

I'd like to be able to tell you that this address was written last week after careful and considered study around the subject but in truth it was written last night after I'd had several glasses of champagne at Patricia Walker's memorial. I blame the lateness of the hour and the effects of the alcohol for the fact that I slightly lost the plot and when I talked to Joy Croft who was staying with me she asked the simple question – "why did you put Candlemas and Imbolc together Sarah – what is it that links them? What's the theme of the service?"

My first thought was that just about the only thing that links these two festivals is that they happen on the same day – February 2nd, although even that can be disputed since Imbolc moves around by a day or two, depending on which calendar you consult. They come from two different religious traditions. Imbolc is one of the 8 pagan sabbats and as such its origins are lost in the mists of time. It means literally 'in milk' and refers to the lactation of herd animals at this time of year, particularly the sheep whose lambs are being born now.

Candlemas is a Christian festival and of course like so many Christian festivals it was placed on the same date as the pagan festival in order to replace the ancient with the modern. If we look more closely at some of the Candlemas traditions much older beliefs can still be spotted.

For modern Christians one of the key themes of Candlemas is that of Jesus as light of the world. In the middle ages when candles were both expensive and precious, people would bring their candles to church on Candlemas Day for them to be blessed. Those candles were considered precious not just because of the light they brought to people's dark homes but because they were thought to give protection against plague, other illnesses and famine.

Joy Croft mentioned, in her story earlier in the service, that in the Celtic tradition the triple goddess Brighid – the maiden, mother, crone – symbolized the renewal of life itself – containing as she did the triple aspects of the divine feminine. At Imbolc the people of Ireland would light their candles in honour of their goddess Brighid. Even we who are cosseted in our centrally heated, electrically lit homes – haven't most of us noticed with some relief the lengthening of the days these last few weeks – hasn't it felt like a symbol of hope – the light is returning to the earth once more, the darkness of winter is loosening its hold on the earth. To the ancient Celts their candles symbolised the return of light and gave thanks to Brighid for her part in bringing back light to the world.

If you explore the spread of Christianity in Ireland it is remarkable the speed with which the pagan goddess Brighid is found a place in Christian mythology. She becomes Saint Bridget by around the fifth century – keeping many of her ancient qualities and aspects – but with an additional role as the Virgin Mary's mid-wife and Christ's foster mother. And throughout the Christian world Candlemas becomes linked with the ritual purification of Mary, 40 days after Jesus' birth and also with the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple – as was normal practice for Jewish families at that time.

Candlemas can be viewed as one of those festivals where the deep symbolism just won't lie down and go away – and I sometimes wonder if that happens when a really important human archetype or yearning is being touched or re-awakened. Listen to these words from mythologist Joseph Campbell, who spent his life collecting and interpreting myths from olden days and helping people to reinterpret them for today:

“The woman with her baby is the basic image of mythology. The first experience of anybody is the mother's body. And what Le Debleu called ‘participation mystique’, mystic participation between the mother and child and the child and the mother, is the final happy land.”

For Campbell one of our tasks as human beings is individuation – the process in Jungian terms of becoming fully that which we truly are. And one of the important steps along this path of individuation is to acknowledge the role of the mother – both the mother in our own individual lives but perhaps more importantly at the symbolic and psychic level – the role of the divine feminine principle – she who nourishes – gaining union once more with that which has given us birth. At this level of thinking the concern, shown particularly by young people, about humanity's desecration of mother earth who bears and sustains all life – is significant – it demonstrates perhaps a growing understanding of the need to honour where we come from and where we return to. For we humans are earthly creatures – our very atoms are made of the stuff of earth itself. And we cannot hurt the earth without harming ourselves.

And what better way to heighten our awareness of mother earth's importance to us than to pay attention to her changing seasons, to notice the myriad signs of seasonal re-awakening going on a round us – to hear that bird song and smell that fresh air.

Other ancient customs from this time of year may also appeal to us today. Imbolc is a time for spring cleaning – literally – perhaps cleaning those windows or tidying out a cluttered drawer or cupboard. Or perhaps a metaphorically spring clean of re-examining old patterns and habits – and making some changes, letting go of habitual ways of thinking and being that no longer serve us. Imbolc emphasises the importance of nourishment in human life – again, literally, what we eat and drink – and also how we seek nourishment at a soul level. For farmers Imbolc is the time to start preparing the soil for planting – and again that requires paying attention. The best farmers and gardeners don't base their actions on the calendar. Just because it's the end of January does not mean the soil is necessarily ready.

A few years ago here at Essex Church some of us took part in a ceremony to awaken the earth – in days gone by villagers would travel round the edge of their territory and sing and shout and bang drums to waken the earth once more. Only then would they start to plough the earth in preparation for planting. On that day we walked round the outside of the church and made a lot of noise – hopefully not worrying the neighbours too much – who after all are used to the myriad strange sounds that emanate from our building from time to time. For us that ceremony represented us reclaiming our building, letting it know it was loved and cared for. In our own lives I wonder how we best re-awaken ourselves in spring time; do we have rituals that we carry out, what changes do we pay attention to in the world around us?

(Seek examples.)

So for me this time of year is about paying attention – awakening from winter's time of rest and renewal – observing the natural world around us. Perhaps that's the reason that there are so many sayings about the weather at Candlemas. So in closing today's address I invite you to take part in our very own Essex Church weather forecasting experiment – bearing in mind that there was a dusting of snow in central London yesterday morning and yet the sun is shining so far here today – here's an old rhyme that predicts the weather for us – keep an eye on Tuesday which is Candlemas Day and let's see if we can be more accurate than the Meteorological Office that has had such a challenging winter of failed predictions.

*If candlemas day be fair and bright
Winter will have another fight.
If candlemas day brings cloud and rain
Winter won't then come again.*

*If candlemas day be dry and fair
The half of the winter's to come and mair.
If candlemas day be wet and foul
The half of the winter's gone at Yule.*

And whether the weather be wet or dry, cold or warm, may we all find an inner warmth and light to nourish us – and may this be so – amen.