



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Candlemas (2nd February) 2025

Whatever the priests and scribes might have told parents, I suspect that the dominant thought in their minds when they came for the rites at the centre of today's festival was one of joy and relief that they had got this far. As we are frequently reminded, child-birth was a perilous time for both mother and child and forty days on from that was an important mile-post in the search for reassurance that all was well. Probably, much the same could be said of women who, for centuries, came to be churched - the Christian instantiation of the Jewish observance.

It was the moment when one could safely begin to dream dreams about what might be: to turn one's thoughts to the child's future life: well, it was for most people. However, for Mary there was to be no such discretion; her Son's destiny was, as Simeon's prophecy declared, already mapped out; and, indeed, had been laid down before the dawn of time. Her role - and Joseph's - was simply to nurture Jesus for what must be. From the outset, His destiny was the constraining factor in the care that they offered Him. There was, after all, to be no continuation of the family line through Him; and in the ordinary sense, He would not be there to care for them as they aged: His destiny foreclosed on many of the aspirations that parents lay on their children.

It is possible to infer from the Gospel narratives that Mary and Joseph did not always find their lot an easy one. Although mention is made of Joseph, he does not appear in the narrative of Jesus' adult life; and, whilst it is true that Mary was there at the Crucifixion, earlier engagements with her Son do not appear to have been overly gentle.

Perhaps she struggled with her lot. The *Fiat Mihi* that she uttered at the Annunciation did not just embrace the Conception of Jesus, but the whole business of motherhood; and, maybe, the unfolding demands of her initial consent proved more testing than she might have imagined at the time.

In this, we see a rather less glamorous dimension to Mary, the Mother and model of the Church: one characterised not by humble and meek obedience, but of struggle in the service of the divine Will made flesh in the Life of her Son.

Like Mary, individual Christians and the institution of the earthly Church have made assented to service of the divine Will as expressed through the incarnate and continuing Ministry of Christ; and like her, we can find that it is not always as easy as we imagined; sometimes, the initial enthusiasm can struggle to carry us through times when discipleship is inconvenient or uncongenial.

At such moments, there can be a temptation not to follow where Jesus' continuing destiny leads, but to try and make of Him what we want Him to be: Someone Who affirms perspectives and choices that have been inspired not by Him and His Gospel, but by other more worldly influences, not least our own comfort and ambition. Over the centuries, individual Christians and elements of the institutional Church have become adept at developing specious arguments all wrapped up in the language of theology to buttress the choices they wish to make rather than those they should embrace.

As we gather to take a last look at the infant Christ in His manger this morning, we must remind ourselves that the course of His continuing Life is mapped out; and our role, as people who have given Him our commitment is to follow Him where He leads: not to try and guide Him whither we want Him to go: to accept who He is and not try to make Him into what our human frailty wants Him to be.