

Candlemas 2024

Tidenham 9am HC

Tutshill 4pm Evensong

Malachi 3: 1-5

Luke 2: 22-40

As many of you know, my husband Dave and I are Puppy Raisers for Guide Dogs UK. Lovely golden retriever puppy Rowan has lived with us since July last year and, if he passes all his tests and shows what a Good Boy he is, he will go on to Guide Dog 'big school' for formal training later this year. Long before Rowan came into our lives I had picked up a book called 'What My Golden Retriever Taught Me About God'. It is one of the books that made the cut when I was emptying my study shelves before moving full time to Park Hill. So, when I heard that our puppy would be a 'Goldie' I thought maybe this was one of those little coincidences, a nudge from God, to keep him in mind, and to listen and look for his presence and grace.

One of Rowan's superpowers is that he can appear to be deeply asleep, 'dead to the world' but even the slightest move towards the fridge (cheese and carrots are both favourite foods), or to his kibble tub, and he is suddenly completely alert, almost vibrating with expectation. I can't believe how quickly he is 'right there' at my side, looking hopeful! It's with that image in mind that I've been reflecting on today's Bible readings.

As you know, this year in our parish we are focusing on growing and maturing in our worship of God and trying to better understand what it is that pleases him. Even in this first sentence of our Old Testament reading I think there is something to help us with our quest.

We read in Malachi

"The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple".

I wonder, is that what we expect in our worship this morning? That the Lord God of heaven and earth will 'suddenly' be here with us? Not 'suddenly' as in jumping out from behind a pillar to give us a shock, or doing a spot check, but golden retriever-style 'suddenly': right beside us, completely alert, throbbing with expectation and full of hope. There's energy and verve in this sort of 'suddenly' that is not so much the opposite of peace but bursts out of it with joy.

Our New Testament reading shows us what this sort of 'suddenly' looked like in the earthly life of Jesus. We read about Simeon and Anna who had both been worshipping in the Temple, faithfully seeking God's promised Saviour. Luke shares with us the effect of the sudden appearance of Jesus. Their years of waiting fell away as they held the child and praised God for his goodness and faithfulness. There is such joy and expectation, as well as a sense of fulfilment, in Simeon's words and in Anna's cradling of the baby. The sudden appearance of God's Son transformed their patient waiting into hopes fulfilled and hearts on fire.

Maybe some of us here recognise that because we too have experienced God's 'sudden' presence in church, or at a big Christian event or through sacred music, or the prayer of sustained silence, but for others God suddenly appears when we watch the sunset, or dance, or hold a tiny baby or maybe even when we spend time with our golden retriever! (Other breeds are available and are an equal blessing!) But my guess is that if we are honest with ourselves, and with God, most of us yearn for him to 'suddenly' be with us much more. So how do these passages, and this season of the church year, help us?

1. Mary and Joseph were faithful in keeping the commandment to bring an offering to God after the birth of their firstborn son. Simeon and Anna worshipped at the Temple on a regular basis. The Creator may 'suddenly' be with us as he chooses, but we can make ourselves available to him through our commitment and faithfulness in living lives that are obedient to his Law of Love and in worshipping on a regular basis.
2. The Lord's presence is not always comfortable. The passage in Malachi speaks of refining fire and fuller's soap. But this sort of testing is only invested in materials of value. Even when he suddenly appears to make us sorely aware of our failure to do the good we could, and the ease with which we fail to love, it is because we are precious and loved. Simeon warned Mary that she would face pain like that of a sword piercing her very soul and that of course reminds us of her grief standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified and of the sword that pierced his side. Jesus gave his life so that we may live in God's presence. We may face times of trial, (Lent is coming), but the power that held us captive to fear has been overcome by love in Jesus' death and resurrection. Friends, let's encourage one another, and allow others to encourage us, so that in the time of trial we may stand firm.
3. The Christmas and Epiphany season is an annual reminder that God is not 'dead to the world', to human tragedies and anxieties, or to the increasing volatility caused by global heating and human wastefulness. Jesus came to dwell with us, to be part of a family, to live a truly human life. Today, Candlemas, we celebrate that he is light in darkness and that whatever is happening in the wider world, or otherwise beyond our control, he is the sudden spark that brings comfort and even joy despite the bleakness and fog. So, in our prayers let's engage with the great darknesses of our generation and ask for the light of Christ to suddenly appear. We may not have solutions, we may not even have the words, but as we open our hearts, the Holy Spirit will pray within us and for us and our hope will grow.

Some things to ponder

Thank God for a moment when he was 'suddenly' beside you.

How might you be an encouragement to someone who faces a testing time this week?

What great powers of darkness cause you to fear? Ask Jesus to bring light in the darkness in those situations.