

February 2012

### **Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple: “Festival of Lights”**

The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is celebrated among Eastern Christians on February 2. This same feast is known in the West as the Purification of the Mother of God or Candlemas. It is celebrated forty days after the birth of Jesus and brings to a close the Christmas-Theophany (Epiphany) season.

As I child, this feast was among my favourites as at the end of the Divine Liturgy each parishioner – including me! – was presented with their very own candle to take home and light before an icon in prayer.

Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem on the fortieth day after his birth:

“When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons’” (Luke 2: 22-24).

The Christ child was met by an elderly man named Simeon:

“Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word: for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people in Israel’” (Luke 2: 28:32).

This meeting is significant. It tells us that the Old is over and the New has begun. The two Covenants have now met: Israel’s glory has dawned in the person of Christ, who is a “light of revelation to the Gentiles.” Christ’s birth has brought about for the whole world a new creation.

The symbol of light in Simeon’s prayer – which found its way into our daily vespers or evening prayer – is a constant reminder that Christ is the “Light of the World.” Christ has come to enlighten and guide us as Christians on our earthly path towards eternal salvation: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8: 12).

As a constant reminder of Christ’s light enlightening our way, even today the fourth century custom continues of having two lighted candles, one on each side of the Gospel when it is proclaimed during liturgical services. Saint Jerome (fourth century) explains: “In all the churches of the East, whenever the Gospel is to be read, candles are lighted although the sun is already shining. Of course, it is not done to dispel the darkness but to express our joy... Under the material light that Light is represented of which the psalmist speaks: ‘Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’” (*Against Vigilantius*, 7).

Whether candles are held at the reading of the Gospel or placed in front of icons at prayer time, they – and the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple – help to remind us of our own personal encounter with Christ the True Light and that our hearts and lives are to burn with the love of God.

Bishop David Motiuk  
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Prayer of Blessing of Candles  
At the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

O Lord Jesus Christ, the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world: pour forth your blessing on these candles and sanctify them with the light of your grace. As these candles, kindled with visible fire, dispel the darkness of night, grant that our hearts, enlightened by the invisible fire – that is, by the radiance of the Holy Spirit – might avoid all sinful blindness. With the eye of our soul cleansed from sin, enable us to see all that is pleasing to you and all that is necessary for salvation; so that, having overcome the dark trials of the world, we might be made worthy to attain the light that never fades.

For you are our Saviour and to you we render glory, with your Father who is without beginning, and your all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and ever. Amen.