

## Sermon Notes

Candlemas 2017: the Celebration of New Ministry for Canon Kevin Hunt  
St. James, Vancouver BC

*And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.*

The second day of February is a day with many designations. For northern Celts, it was known as St. Brigid's Day or the beginning of the season Imbolc—heralding the approach of spring with lamps and bonfires celebrating the return of the light. In North America it's known as Groundhog Day with the rodent known as Punxsutawney Phil peeping out of his lair—this year he apparently did see his shadow, portending another 6 weeks of winter.

And in the Christian Church February 2 has 3 designations for the same festival—the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and Candlemas—all commemorating that sacred event just recounted to us in the gospel reading from St. Luke. It was both Mary's purification after childbirth and because Jesus was the firstborn, his presentation to God as his life was dedicated to God. From Blessed Simeon's words, spoken of Jesus, Candlemas honours the light of Christ to enlighten the Gentiles—all the world. So we bless candles, we sing of the light of Christ, we celebrate the five Biblical characters of this story, Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph and of course our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke writes that his parents were amazed at all that was said of him. He's but 40 days old, the infant Jesus but already they are amazed at him because of what Simeon said of him and Anna's blessing of him. They would continue to be amazed because Jesus life unfolded in such an extraordinary way.

Now while all parents are amazed by their children, there's a way in which Joseph and particularly Mary's expectations were overturned. It was because she had, in a sense two conceptions of him, and then four ways that she had to let him go. For this insight I am grateful to an article by Father Mark Clavier<sup>1</sup>, the Vice Principal at St. Stephen's House in Oxford. Let me unfold it for you.

Two conceptions of Jesus for Mary—first, after the Annunciation, she imagined Jesus in her mind; second in her body as he grew and developed within her. And then, she had to let him go four times—first in his birth, second as she handed him over to Simeon who took Jesus in his arms and proclaimed him as light to the world, third, when she saw him dying on the cross. Fourth, and perhaps most profoundly, the letting go of the way she'd imagined Jesus in her mind to accept the Jesus lived and taught, lived and died.

In this fourth way, we are all like the Blessed Mother as we have to let the Christ of our imaginings go, to receive who Christ we meet at the Scripture, Sacrament and ministry. Oh, how we would like to keep Jesus close and cozy, the unthreatening babe in the manger or the sleepy infant cradled in Simeon's arms. A passive Jesus allows us to make him what we want but the problem is this: your imagined Christ is probably not

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<sup>1</sup> *Letting Go of Christ* an article in the *Living Church* by Mark Clavier, December 30, 2016 <http://livingchurch.org/covenant/2016/12/30/letting-go-of-christ/>

like mine—so each of us has to let go our own imagined precious Jesus to encounter the one who meets us in scripture and sacrament and in the real lives we encounter. Christ is always incognito and always leading us into new life.

Now, just as we have to let go our personal conceptions of Christ before we can truly encounter the Risen One, so too, we must let go of our deeply held imaginings of what the church is. All of us who live close to the life of the church have our own ideas of what and how the church should be. We carry with us well-defended thoughts about what the church is supposed to be and then experience frustration when the church as it actually is is so different from what we imagine. As Archbishop Michael Peers was fond of saying, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church and I’d sure like to see it sometime!”

On this night, the second day of February 2017, we celebrate the beginning of a new ministry here at St. James as Father Kevin Hunt is inducted as the Rector of this beloved parish. This is an important place in Vancouver, and in the diocese, indeed in the Canadian Church as the beautiful traditions of Anglo Catholic liturgy are practiced here and Christ is worshipped both at the Altar and in the lives of the people who call this neighbourhood home. Anglo Catholic parishioners carry in their minds pretty fixed ideas of what the church is, how the liturgy is to be conducted, how the festivals are to be celebrated, and how the work of service and mission should be carried out. That’s OK, but it can limit our imaginations making it difficult to speak across differences to discern how the living Christ is calling us to be the people in God now in this time and in this place.

There’s a poignant moment in the baptismal liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church, when the family presenting the infant meets the priest at the font; at the moment of baptism, rather than handing the child over to the priest, the child is placed on the church floor lying alone until the priest picks the infant up in arms and takes the child to the water.

That moment for the parents, of placing the child on the church floor is a moment of letting go, of letting go of control. It is truly a moment of death and resurrection because an infant left alone would perish but when the priest, as Christ’s representative takes the child to the font to administer the sacrament of new birth a mini resurrection occurs. The child is raised from death to life.

Ever since I learned about this Orthodox custom I have had a deep sense of reverence for that moment at a baptism when infant is given over the priest—it is a moment of enormous trust. And I can only imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to let their first born son Jesus go into the arms of that elderly man, Simeon, not knowing what he might say or do. It was the first but not the last time they would have to let him go. In the course of my spiritual journey and I’m sure yours as well, growth comes when we let go and let God.

The history of this parish is replete with times of letting go. Part of why I feel so connected to this place is because Christ Church was formed from this community almost 129 years ago. The people that founded Christ Church were let go from here to form something new in what was then the suburbs. The clergy and people of St. James let be them be free to follow Christ in their way and supported them as they made that journey. I think of the work begun by May Guttridge and others that offered care and service to the poor and how that grew and developed in its own way. I remember how St. James

was when I first came to this diocese 23 years ago: it was a place where our deanery clericus could not celebrate Eucharist together because at that time, the ministry of women clergy was not accepted here; yet here we are tonight with women clergy on your ordained ministry team and your new Rector being inducted by our beloved Bishop Melissa. There's been so much letting go all in the service of being more faithful to the Risen Christ who is always leading his followers into the future .

Father Kevin comes into this place not as a stranger but as one who has already become a friend and pastor. You have come to know him with all his gifts and all his limitations and he wants to work with you so that St. James can express itself as Body of Christ in this place, the Light of Christ for this community. He does not want the focus of this evening or of his ministry to be about him but about who you can be together as a community of worship, inclusive welcome, and service. As you develop and sustain your ministries of Street Outreach, connection with First Nations, responding to the Fentanyl crisis and in so many other ways you will encounter the Risen Christ not only at the Altar but in your lives broken open for the good of the world.

St. James is an important place for this neighbourhood and city. The gospel of Christ of which we are stewards has so much to offer to a world where xenophobia leads to violence, where people too easily judge and dismiss each other and where compassion and kindness are in too short supply.

My prayer this evening is that, like Mary and Joseph, we might be amazed: amazed at what God can do with us when we let go some of our assumptions and be open to the one who meets us in the Holy Eucharist. What a wonderful night to begin our amazement as we celebrate this most glorious feast day together—and may the light that Blessed Simeon proclaimed shine in our hearts and minds, breaking us open so that we might perceive the Risen Christ who is greater than any of our imaginings and be open to the work that we are given to do as his body in the world.

Preached by the Very Reverend Peter G. Elliott  
February 2, 2017