

CANDLEMAS - A CHRISTIAN HOLIDAY

by Elizabeth Young

Candlemas, a Christian holiday on February 2, is a solemn and worshipful time, a time to try to be “a light in the world.”

Christians believe it celebrates the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the Virgin Mary’s ritual purification. It was the custom at that time, forty days after the birth of a Jewish boy, for him to be presented to God in the temple.

In the Luke gospel (Luke 2:32), Simeon held Jesus and said that he would be the ‘Light to the World’ – it is thought this is how Candlemas originally got its name.

The Virgin Mary’s ritual purification was forty days after the birth of Jesus. Women were thought to be ‘unclean’ after they’d given birth (40 days for a boy and 60 days for a girl), and couldn’t worship in the temple until they’d been ‘purified’.

Candlemas marks the midpoint of winter, halfway between the December solstice and the March equinox.

“If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter has another flight
If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, winter will not come again”

Many believe that Candlemas activities derive from Imbolc, a Gaelic festival, or the Roman feast of Lupercalia. In pre-Christian times, February 2nd was called the ‘Feast of Lights’ and was a hope and welcome for milder weather and for the life-giving sun as winter turned to spring. The Church tried to replace Imbolc which was dedicated to the Goddess of Youth and Fertility - Bride. Thus, in the 5th century, February 1st became St. Brigid’s Day and February 2nd became Candlemas. In Ireland, Candlemas lapsed during the time of the Penal Laws but was revived afterwards.

There’s a popular legend which explains why Candlemas falls immediately after St. Brigid’s Day. Mary was very nervous about bringing the infant Jesus to the crowded Temple. St. Brigid promised to help her by distracting the crowds. She did this by appearing to the multitude wearing a headdress bearing many lighted candles. In gratitude, Mary decreed that a feast day honouring St. Brigid should take place the day before Candlemas.

Snowdrops are also known as Candlemas Bells - Snowdrops are considered unlucky if they are taken into the house before Candlemas Day, signifying a farewell or death. Nowadays, however, some people think that snowdrops help to purify a home.

Many Christians see snowdrops as a symbol of Christ bringing hope to the world.

Any Christmas decorations not taken down by Twelfth Night (January 6th) should be left up until Candlemas Day and then taken down.

Finally, in this brief look at candle lore, it is said to be very ill-omened to light a candle from the fire on the hearth. There are those who believe that if a person does this, they will become impoverished. As a measure of protection from this misfortune or any others for that matter, here is a blessing by Andrew Greeley, written expressly for the saints who celebrate their feast days in February:

May good St. Brigid keep you warm till spring

And fill your head with poetry and song

May your true heart with the help of Valentine

Love you deeply this month and all year long

May Blaise protect you from the common cold and sore throat, hacking cough and snuffy nose

May Mother Mary's candles light your road and at the end of the day bring sweet repose.

And may God, who tells the stories of His love through the saints, who love us too, bless you.

The feast of St. Blaise of Sebaste falls on February 3rd and the following prayer is recited by a priest as he holds two crossed candles to your throat: "Through the intercession of St. Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God deliver you from every disease of the throat and from every other illness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."