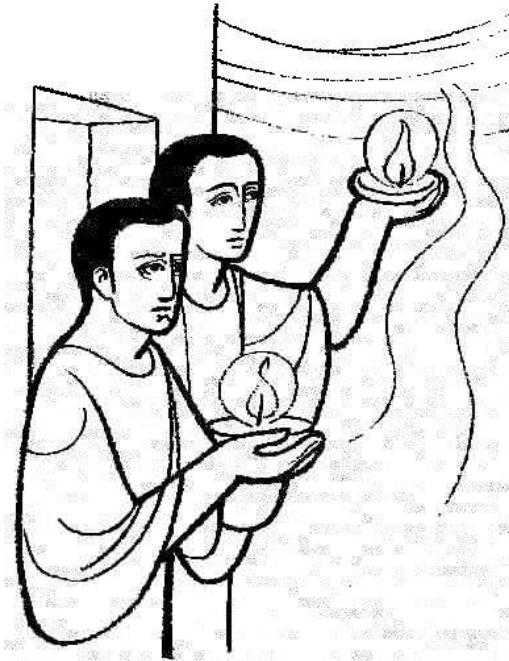


EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

No. 15

LET THERE BE LIGHT!



- the use and meaning of candles

INTRODUCTION

Candles – and before them, oil lamps – have been used in worship since human beings first sensed the divine. The need to dispel the darkness has practical, psychological, symbolic and spiritual aspects and their use in churches and other places of worship draws on all these aspects. Clearly there is a practical need for light, and before the utilisation of gas and electricity light was provided by oil lamps and candles. As one of the four classical elements of nature (earth, fire, air and water), light and fire are deeply symbolic as we need to dispel the darkness that is both without and within. Not for nothing is light the first thing that was brought into being (*Gen. 1: 3*) after the creation of the heavens and the earth. Finally, of course, light has a spiritual dimension. St. John makes that clear when he speaks of the life that the Word brought into the world as the light of men ‘and light shines in the darkness, and darkness could not overpower it.’ (*John 1: 4/5*). St. John, in particular, presents Jesus as the Light of the World whilst St. Paul realises the power of light to bring people to recognise truth.

Throughout the New Testament there are instances when Jesus is realised through light; one has only to think of a great event such as the Transfiguration, or the story of Jesus’ appearance to the disciple on the Emmaus road when their eyes were opened and they recognised him (*Luke 24: 31*). Seeing is believing.

Roman pagan culture also used candles in religious practice. Lit candles were used in religious and military processions, showing the divine presence, aid, or favour of the gods. With the development of emperor worship, candles were also lit near his image as a sign of respect and reverence. Remember that by the time of Jesus, the emperor was considered divine and even given the titles, *Pontifex Maximus* (High Priest) and *Dominus et Deus* (Lord and God).

So it is that light plays a large part in the life of the church and, in this short article, I want to explain the meaning behind some of the ways we use candles in church.

THE PASCHAL CANDLE

The *Paschal (Easter) Candle*, lit from a New Fire as the first act during the Great Vigil of Easter symbolises the power of Christ to overcome sin and death. The candle, traced with a cross, pierced by five grains of incense to symbolise the wounds of Christ and marked with the year of our redemption, is borne aloft into the darkness of the church, placed in a central position, censured and the focus of the hauntingly beautiful *Exsultet*. It remains central to our worship throughout Eastertide.

During the octave of Easter, because this candle represents the Risen Christ, it is lit on first entering the church and remains alight until the church is closed. After that, throughout Eastertide, it is lit whenever worship is offered and, whenever incense is offered, it is censed. After Eastertide it is placed next to the Font as a constant reminder that, through our Baptism, we are part of this new life. It is lit at Baptisms and at Funerals when we affirm that those who have died in Christ are part of His risen body.

HANGING LAMPS

Wherever the Blessed Sacrament is reserved a *white* (or, sometimes, red) lamp hangs. This is a reminder that Christ is present in the Blessed Sacrament (beneath the sacred form of bread) reserved either in a Tabernacle or Aumbry (wall safe). Sometimes it is reserved in a hanging Pyx (as in Westminster Abbey). We should always genuflect on one knee whenever we pass the Blessed Sacrament as a sign of respect to our Lord.

In many churches one, three or seven *red* lamps hang in the Sanctuary. This symbolises the presence of God (a trinity of Persons) in this place. The symbolism of seven hanging lamps comes from the Book of the Revelation (*'and in front of (God's) throne there were seven flaming lamps burning, the seven Spirits of God ' Rev. 4:5 NJB*)

In Judaism, a perpetual light was kept burning in the Temple and the synagogues not only to insure the ability to light other candles or oil lamps in the evening but also to show the presence of God (*cf. Ex 27:20-21 and Lv 24:2-4*). Later, the Talmud prescribed a lit lamp at the Ark, where the Torah and other writings of Sacred Scripture were kept, to show reverence to the Word of God. (This practice probably influenced our own tradition of having a lit candle near the Tabernacle to indicate the presence of and to show reverence for the Blessed Sacrament.) Because of this, these Lamps are never extinguished.

VOTIVE LAMPS

Christians adapted the use of lit candles (or even oil lamps in the Eastern Roman Empire) and there is evidence that lit candles or oil lamps were burned at the tombs of saints, particularly martyrs, by the 200s, and before sacred images and relics by the 300s.

St. Jerome (d. 420) in his *Contra Vigilantium* attested to this practice. Note, however, that this practice probably existed well before our available written evidence. The tradition is continued by the presence of candles in red or blue

glasses before the image of saints (blue for Mary; red for all other saints). These lamps attest the presence of Christ in the lives of those before whose image they burn. Again, they should never be extinguished as their light never fades and their lives radiate the holiness of God. However, for practical purposes they are extinguished when a church is locked but should be re-lit prior to opening. Unlike altar candles they are not lit simply for a service.

ACOLYTE CANDLES

Besides the use at baptism and at funerals we learn from the so-called Fourth Council of Carthage that in conferring the minor order of 'acolyte' The candidate had delivered to him "a candlestick with a candle". The usage is observed to the present day. Such candles as these when carried by acolytes, as we learn from the *Gregorian Sacramentary* and the *Ordines Romani*, were constantly used in the Roman Ceremonial from the seventh century and probably still earlier. These candles were placed upon the pavement of the sanctuary and not until much later upon the altars.

The rubrics also prescribe that two acolytes with candles should walk at the head of the procession to the sanctuary, and these two candles are also carried to do honour to the chanting of the Gospel at High Mass, as well as to the singing of the little chapter and the collects at Vespers, etc. Similarly the bishop when he makes his entry into a church is received and escorted by the acolytes with their candles. Again a bishop when taking part in any ecclesiastical function in the sanctuary has a little candlestick of his own, known as the *bugia*, which is held beside him by a chaplain or cleric (or left on the High Altar).

ALTAR CANDLES

The practice of setting candles upon the table of the altar itself seems to be somewhat older than the twelfth century. As the Roman pontiff, according to the *Ordines*, was preceded by seven acolytes carrying candles, and as these candles at a later period were placed upon the altar and no longer upon the pavement, it is a tempting hypothesis to identify the six altar-candlesticks of an ordinary High Mass (there are seven when the bishop of the diocese pontificates) with the acolytes' candlesticks of the Roman *Ordines*. The lighting of six candles upon the altar is now enjoined for every High Mass, four at every Missa Cantata (sung Mass), or for the private Mass of a bishop on festivals, and two for all other Masses.

Still a certain freedom is left of lighting more candles on occasions of solemnity. Six candles should also be lighted at Evensong and Morning Prayer when the Office is sung on great feasts, but on less solemn occasions two or four suffice.

VOTIVE CANDLES

Candles are lit before shrines towards which people wish to show special devotion. The stand in which they are placed is known as a 'pricket stand' and the candle burning its life out before a statue is felt to be symbolical of prayer and sacrifice and to light a candle for someone indicates one's intention to say a prayer for another person, and the candle symbolizes that prayer. Candles used may vary from long, taper-type candles to tea-light candles. The person who has offered the candle leaves it behind as a reminder that our prayer never leaves the presence of God, in company with His Saints. Prayer is not self-centred, it is God centred, and an important element is prayer for other people and causes. The candle is not a substitute for the prayer of the heart, but an accompaniment. A small offering which, in honouring the Saint and giving glory to God, speaks both from the heart and to the heart. It is a devotional practice in which many millions of Christians the world over have found inspiration.

Candles are also lit as *ex-voto* offerings to Christ or a saint. It is given in fulfillment of a vow (hence the Latin term, short for *ex voto suscepto*, "from the vow made") or in gratitude or devotion. (Ex-voto's can take a wide variety of forms and may include texts explaining a miracle attributed to the helper, or symbols such as a painted or modeled reproduction of a miraculously healed body part, or a directly related item such as a crutch given by a person formerly lame. They are also offered as a testimony to later visitors of the received help. There are places where a very old tradition of depositing ex-voto's existed, such as Abydos in ancient Egypt.)

CONCLUSION

The word candle (*candela*, from *candeo*, to burn) was introduced into the English language as an ecclesiastical term, probably as early as the eighth century. Whilst at one time they provided a practical solution to the need for light they quickly developed a theological and spiritual meaning associated with the light of God in Christ overcoming the darkness that can envelop the world. From the opening sentences of Genesis to the closing pages of Revelation we are reminded that God is light and that that light is intended to bring life to the world.

And we are invited to share in that enlightening process. The small candle given to each newly-baptised person is a reminder that we are to share in this enlightening work. As Christians, that is our calling. As Anglicans we can remind ourselves of this every time we enter church and, at the Great Vigil of Easter, we are encouraged to take the light of the risen Christ out of the church at the end of Mass. Having celebrated the triumph of light over darkness we leave with the words of faith in our hearts and on our lips: *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!!*