

# The Bright Lights of the City

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London could easily rival Paris for the title 'city of light'. Anyone visiting the capital is struck by the amount of light cast into the night sky by the houses, blocks of flats, great monuments and office blocks. Sometimes the floodlights of London highlight the beautiful details of buildings that would otherwise be shrouded in darkness. Sometimes the streetlights provide guidance and reassurance for those wandering the streets. Mostly, the lights of London cast a polluting cloud over the city which obscures the beauty of the stars.

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the capital of Israel some two thousand years ago, they must have found Jerusalem a busy and polluted place. But the Temple, the holiest place in Israel, was in the heart of the city, and the Law required that all firstborn sons should be brought there to be consecrated to God. We know from the Gospel what happened on that occasion. Simeon and Anna, who had waited years in the Temple, recognised in the baby Jesus that God has sent his Messiah, his anointed one. Simeon praised God, declaring 'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (*Luke 2:30-32*).

For centuries the Roman Catholic Church has marked this event on 2<sup>nd</sup> February as the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. Other Christian Churches give the feast a variety of titles, but Roman Catholics used to call it Candlemas because it was the day when priests blessed candles for use throughout the year in the church and in the home. The blessing of candles was a reminder of Simeon's words that Christ is 'a light for revelation'; a light that illuminates for us what God is like.

It therefore seemed really appropriate that 2<sup>nd</sup> February was chosen as the day on which to launch a new Carmelite Spirituality Group in London, known as *Carmel in the City*. At 11.30 that day about forty participants gathered in the car park of St. Joseph's Church in Lamb's Passage, off Bunhill Row. The candles we clutched in our hands provided little warmth against the bitter wind that day. I thought the water being sprinkled in blessing would turn to snow before it reached the candles! Around us the city of London was about its usual business. The hymn we sang as we processed from the car park into the church was drowned out by the sound of aircraft overhead and construction work all around us. London was just as noisy and busy as Jerusalem must have been in Simeon's day, and Christ's light was shining all over.

Once inside the church other candles were lit, including a peace lamp from the Holy Land to remind us of the Carmelite Family's origins in the place where Jesus walked. The gospel was proclaimed by Fr. Pat O'Keeffe who had travelled up from Walworth in south London, another busy part of the capital where a community of four friars live. The Eucharist was celebrated by the Prior Provincial, Fr. Tony Lester. Fr. Tony preached about the challenges and opportunities of sharing Christ's light with those living in one of the biggest and busiest cities in the world. He reminded us that we are not so much called to bring Christ's light to others as to recognise that light already present in them. This explains the ethos behind Carmelite Spirituality

Groups (CSGs). Instead of expecting saintly people to walk shining through the door, CSGs offer a safe and welcoming space where people can reflect light upon each other. CSGs are open to anyone interested in Carmel's ancient wisdom and insights into life. You don't need to be a Carmelite already, you don't need to be a Catholic, you don't even need to be a Christian. All you need is to be yourself, just as you are, because Jesus came to be a light to all people, Israelites and Gentiles, and we're all reflections of God's brilliance. 'Let your face shine on us O God, and we shall be saved' (*Psalm 80:3*).



*Fr. Tony Lester preaching at St. Joseph's.*

Fr. Tony spoke of how the Carmelites first came to London in 1247. This was the year when the Carmelites gathered in Aylesford to discuss their future. The decisions they took there led them to cease being hermits and become friars (brothers) living in the midst of the people. Having discerned this new vocation, they headed immediately to London where they established a community near Fleet Street, one of the rougher parts of the city. It was here that people came seeking God, and the welcome of the Whitefriars. Many would have come to light candles in the priory church, using light to symbolise their prayer. Some of those coming to the Carmelites were on the margins of society and the church, seeking sanctuary at the altar of God.



*Street signs still witness to the medieval Carmelite presence in London.*

At the end of Mass Fr. Tony's Delegate to the Third Order, John Berry, read out the decree formally establishing the *Carmel in the City* group. Although it is not a Third Order chapter in the usual sense, the group is recognised as an initiative of the Carmelite Family in Britain and will be under the oversight of the Provincial Delegate. Fr. Tony spoke about how the Carmelite Spirituality Groups are a new expression of Carmel responding to the needs of people today. We don't know how the group will develop, but if we are open to the Holy Spirit then like the first Carmelites who came to London in 1247 we needn't worry about this venture. The first Carmelites in the capital weren't clear about their identity: they were hermits stepping out on the

journey of becoming friars. The *Carmel in the City* group will take some time to work out its identity, but it is also open to many different expressions of what it is to be Carmelite: friar, hermit, enclosed nun, active sister, tertiary, scapular wearer, or enquirer.



*John Berry reading the decree of erection.*

The decree of erection declares *Carmel in the City* to be under the patronage of St. Joseph and Our Lady of the City. At the end of the Eucharist we processed to the back of the church where the Mother of God is depicted as *Mary, Mother of the City* in a beautiful Coptic icon by the French-born iconographer Stephane Rene. What struck me about this painting is that there are no conventional symbols of a city, such as buildings and crowds of people; instead, Mary is standing on a verdant hillside (not unlike depictions of Carmel), and the River Thames flows at her feet. In front of this icon we sang together the *Salve Regina*; for centuries Carmelites have sung an antiphon to Our Lady at the end of Mass. The spirituality group will pass on the best of Carmel's such traditions, whilst looking to communicate to new people – especially the young – in ways that they are more familiar with.



*Prayers offered before the icon of Mary, Mother of the City.*

After the Eucharist people moved upstairs for a bring-and-share lunch in the parish hall. The same building houses offices for *The Catholic Herald* newspaper and *The Apostleship of the Sea*. The parish – near the artistic centre of the Barbican and the financial centre of the City of London – has undergone a lot of development in recent years. Since 2006 it has been without a resident full-time priest. Nevertheless the parish gathers people from a rich diversity of backgrounds and languages into a committed, vibrant (and musical!) community. The day-to-day running of the parish

is facilitated by a pastoral council of lay people who lead occasional weekday services and make Communion visits to the house-bound. In a time when the number of ordained clergy is decreasing in Britain, St. Joseph's is a reminder of the fact that all Christians have ministries to undertake. The pastoral council are delighted to welcome *Carmel in the City* into the parish, and it seemed to me appropriate that they should have done so on the feast of the Presentation. During his pontificate John Paul II connected the Presentation with the renewal of vows taken by religious (monks, nuns, friars and sisters), because Simeon and Anna's service in the Temple is seen as a model of the religious life dedicated to God. The *Carmel in the City* group is inspired by the spirituality of a religious family within the Church. Just as the lay people of St. Joseph's parish are learning new ways of collaborating creatively with ordained clergy, so the lay members of the Carmelite Family alongside its religious are finding new ways of proclaiming the relevance of Carmel for the world today.

The parishioners at St. Joseph's are very committed to ecumenical dialogue, interfaith outreach, and supporting justice and peace activities. One such parishioner, Sylvia Lucas, highlights issues of justice and peace in the Carmelite Family. A member of the Aylesford Third Order Chapter and former member of the Third Order National Consultative Body (NCB), Sylvia is convening *Carmel in the City* with assistance from fellow Carmelites and parishioners.

During lunch visitors had the opportunity to visit the beautiful *Basil Hume Garden* in front of St. Joseph's which offers an oasis of quiet, refreshment and growth amid the towering concrete of London. Excess food was later given to refugees and asylum seekers care of the London Catholic Workers.



*Sharing food and fellowship in the parish hall.*

After lunch participants (including some tertiaries from the chapters at Warwick Street and Camden Town) listened to a talk on 'Carmelite Spirituality for Today' which Sylvia and Martin had kindly invited me to present. I spoke about how Carmelite spirituality helps me and countless others to better appreciate the presence of God in our world, in the ordinary events and relationships of life. Carmel's saints – living and dead – have taught me that there's no division between 'life' and 'spiritual life'. There's just life! All life has to be lived 'in the Spirit'. There ought to be no artificial gap between my prayer and my service, my relationship with God and my relationship with other people. To borrow a famous London phrase: *Mind the gap!*

In the lively discussion after the presentation, and in the *Lectio Divina* meditation on Luke's account of the Gospel at the end of the day, it dawned on me how relevant Carmel's message is to people in London. We often think of 'Carmel' as first and foremost about solitude and silence, and far removed from the hustle and bustle of city life. Yet even Mount Carmel was never a perfect idyll secluded from the tensions and distractions of the world. When the Carmelites left Mount Carmel and came to Europe, and when they later had to abandon their hermitages and make homes in the cities, they realised that the values of Carmel are something interior. Like Elijah, they knew that God's voice is to be heard not simply in the great dramas of life, but in the sound of silence. In the heart of a busy, noisy, polluted city, it is possible to find peace and silence, indeed the very presence of God, within ourselves and in other people. Perhaps that is why the icon of *Our Lady of the City* doesn't depict any buildings; Mary brings Christ into our hearts, presents him in our inner temples, and a river of life wells up within us. Simeon saw God's light, shining in Jesus, amid the bustle and crowds of the city. Please pray that this new Carmelite community in London will stoke new lights to burn bright in the city.

'It was God who made the great lights'  
*Psalm 135(136):7*

Forthcoming meetings:

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| 1 <sup>st</sup> March | Lent reconciliation liturgy with Provincial-elect Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, and talk on our patron Saint Joseph |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> April | Easter season meeting with discussion of <i>Carmel's Call to Service</i>                                   |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> May   | Meeting with discussion of <i>Mary our Mother and Sister in Carmel</i>                                     |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> June  | Meeting with discussion of <i>Carmel: Love in the Heart of the Church</i>                                  |

For more details about *Carmel in the City*, please contact Sylvia Lucas:

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