Let’s start with two stories of communities gathered around a single, burning candle.

One happens in Jerusalem. You might recognise it. Anna, a woman in great old age, spends every day in the temple in prayer. She’s been widowed for longer than she can remember. Simeon is also a man of prayer who’s inspired by the Holy Spirit to come to the Temple on this day, in this moment, for something, because he must, because he has to, because God wants it. And then a man and a young woman and a young baby come in to do the rites which always happen after a child arrives safely in the world, as many others will today, and tomorrow, and yesterday, and for centuries- but this time Simeon and Mary and Joseph wheel together, brought to this moment by God who promised Simeon’s life would not end until he saw the face of his Saviour, the Messiah, this baby. God brings them together, and as they stand stock still in the midst of purposeful feet and echoey voices Anna arrives too, brought close by something she glimpses or half-sees, brought close by a stillness, a wonder, a hope, a possibility. And they stand there, the four of them, while the rush of the Temple goes on all around them, a perfect circle of people whose lives are lit by the Light of God, whose faces are lit by the Christ-light shining up at them, sleeping.

The second happens in Columbia. In a brutal conflict, horsemen and swords and screams and blood, and a young mother leading a group of innocents to safety after the self-sacrifice of her husband. A new start, and a new village built around the miraculous candle which never burns down. The village is protected by the special gifts of the family Madrigal as it grows, generation after generation. But the price to the young mother, now a Granny and her children and their children is immense, the pressure to show no weakness, to keep the candle burning and the villagers safe. The pressure to be perfect. It becomes too much. The candle fades. The villa falls. All is lost. Until another miracle, of forgiveness and understanding and love, and the house is rebuilt on new foundations, that being who you are is enough, that the real gift is not your skill but you. The candle is rekindled. There is hope- and then more: as the family stand in the ruins of the house and begin to think about rebuilding a chorus of voices from behind them- all of the village have come. It’s everyone in town. And they sing to the family Madrigal: “Lay down your load. We are only down the road. We have no gifts. But we are many and we will do any/thing for you.”

It might not be entirely cool to get that choked up about a Disney film but Encanto, which is our second story, is worth it. It is beautiful. I have carefully skipped over the main details. If you haven’t seen the film yet then you may have heard some of the songs because two of the songs in the top 5 of the charts at the moment are from Encanto, including the number 1 single. If anyone still cares about that. It is a story of community and family- and at the end a whole family, healed, and a whole village gather around a singe candle flame and they sing one song, called All of us. And the village sing to the family who’ve laboured under that immense pressure for decades: “Lay down your load. We are only down the road. We have no gifts. But we are many and we will do any/thing for you.” Which is to say, we’re here now, we’re ready, you can relax, together we’ve got this.

What both of these stories have in common is an essential truth about the Church which God loves and builds and sustains and works through, through this, through us gathered together here and through the community around the candle light which is Christ’s presence here, the sun around which all of our planets move. Anna has been waiting for almost a century for this moment. Simeon has been waiting and looking and hoping for this moment for years and years. And God’s new action, new gift, new embodiment of love comes, borne into the temple in the arms of a village carpenter from the hill country and a young girl who is resolute and every bit as faithful and committed as Anna and Simeon and Joseph despite her years. They form a perfect circle around the light and a perfect community of shared worship which leads to a shared understanding and shared support. Their eyes meet in wonder and in fear. When Simeon takes Jesus in his arms he is, for a moment, allowing her to lay down her load. That circle of love around Jesus the light of the world is a perfect image of the Church- a place of absolute equality and delight at what God is doing, how he is changing the world.

Anna does not complain that Mary is new to this, or ask why God chose her. There is just delight around the flame of Christ, at God who acts and acts powerfully and acts now and does wonders.

Mary and Joseph and Anna and Simeon, and the shepherds and the magi, because they matter too, form an image, an icon of the Church- a community of all ages where the only thing that matters is being in the presence of God’s light- in the candlelight, in prayer, around the altar, receiving the sacrament in our palms, wherever we are conscious of God together.

It is a glimpse of heaven, where everything is worship and the pressures of being enough and doing enough and competing with others and being jealous of others and meeting expectations just fall away because we are face to face with the living God, bathed in his candlelight, and where having others who feel the same and whose faces are lit with the same glow and joy is in itself a joy. We belong together, and we travel together, and we share the burden, and we remind each other constantly that we are enough because being loved is enough and everything and all. Though we are many we’ll do anything for you.

And the mix of generations and experience matters- what could be better for Anna and Simeon to have a newborn baby and a young mother and her husband in their joyful circle, to know God’s new work, to know that he is not stopping now, or giving up, or walking away, but doubling down and raising the stakes and coming into the world to heal in commitment and love? What could be better for us to have more people stepping into the circle around this altar and watching their eyes widen and seeing that same love shining on them and the same delight in response at being here, at being home, and knowing that they are enough, not because of their gifts or their achievements, not despite their failings or disappointments, but because God says I love you?

So, step closer. Look around. Our light has come to the temple, as the angels say on the wall above me. And we, like Simeon and Anna and Mary and Joseph, are those who delight to come to the light, to form a bold and welcoming community of those who find their identity and courage in being loved by God because that is who God is and what God does- young and old, worn down and energetic, confident and questioning, wondering and familiar, all of us lit by Christ’s light and love. Every division falls away and we are one people, loved equally and wholly, to the cross and beyond. One people because of one light.