

New things

Readings: Psalm 148 & Luke 2:22-40

We come at the end of one year and at the dawn of another. Perhaps we cast our minds back over this year with all kinds of emotions – thankfulness, regret, sadness, joy - each of us with a different story to tell. One of the problems with the gospel accounts of the Christmas story is that we know the story so well. Many of us were brought up on the narratives of the birth of Jesus, Jesus' presentation in the Temple and the song of Simeon, the *Nunc dimittis*, which we used to sing at Evensong.

To better capture the drama of the story we have to put ourselves in the shoes of Mary and Joseph. They had just had an incredible year. Without any warning, Mary received a visit from an angel who informed her that she was going to bear the Lord's Messiah. People in those days didn't see angels, it was as if God had been hidden since the days of Malachi. In the Old Testament narrative Zechariah in the second temple period was the last to see angels, some 500 years previously. Yet here we have Mary receiving an angel and what a message he brought! Not only was she to bear the Lord's Messiah but the baby was to come from a virgin birth. This was an extraordinary announcement. Of course she had to tell Joseph, her betrothed husband but that brought trouble. He doubted her story and was going to divorce her, until an angel came to him in a dream and explained that this was indeed from God. This was a testing time for any young couple. And then to cap it all, they had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem just when the baby was due because some Roman Emperor wanted to tax everyone! Not an enviable journey for a heavily pregnant woman who was carrying the One that all Israel had been longing for, for years. Mary and Joseph must have doubted the wisdom of God's timing. I wonder how Mary took it and what she said when Joseph said they had to go to Bethlehem when the baby was due? I know some women would have called the Emperor all kinds of names for his stupidity. Or even flatly refused to go, after all it wasn't any old child she was carrying – this was the Messiah, didn't this stupid man in Rome realize that! Or did the couple discuss things and realize that the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem and this was God's way of getting them there, difficult as it would be? We don't know, the gospel story is silent on that one. Anyway they make the journey to Bethlehem and perhaps, because of Mary's condition, by the time they arrive all the available accommodation is taken. Not a promising situation but a stable is better than the street. The baby is born, and mother and baby are fine – not an insignificant fact in those days. Then their relative peace is disturbed by a bunch of shepherds who turn up and tell of an angel's visit and a vision of the whole angelic choir. God has not forgotten about them, they are still on track. And now we come to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and here in the very centre of Jewish worship they meet the godly Simeon and Anna and God gives them another insight of who the child will become.

So Luke, the gospel writer, although he is a Gentile, is very careful to faithfully record the important Jewish ceremonies that Jesus, as a Jewish baby, experienced. He was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21) and given the name Jeshua, or in Greek Jesus. And here in this passage we had read, Jesus was presented in the Temple as the first born son of Joseph and Mary, and Mary brought the offering for her purification ceremony. Following the birth, Joseph and Mary would also have brought the five shekel redemption money for the firstborn child but Luke omits these details. All these ceremonies, however, are very Jewish and follow the Law of Moses, as Paul declared some years later "When the fullness of time had come, God

sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). Four times in the passage in Luke we have reference to the Law. Jesus was born and raised a Jew. Rather shockingly, during the Second World War the Nazi regime cut out any reference to Jesus being a Jew from the Bibles that they printed.

So let’s picture Joseph and Mary coming up the road from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem for these ceremonies. They were doing what any observant Jewish family would do in following the requirements of the Law. They were also somewhat poor, as they brought the offering proscribed for poorer families. Mary could not enter the Temple until the purification rites had taken place, so when they were completed and the family entered the Court of the Women, the unexpected happened – two very respectable, godly people, an old man and an old lady, both testify that this baby is the longed for Messiah. It is interesting that in Simeon and Anna we have two witnesses and “every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (2 Cor. 13:1, echoing Deut. 19:15). They combined male and female, and perhaps even the old adversarial kingdoms of Judah and Israel, for Anna is said to come from Asher, one of the old northern tribes. Both were impeccable witnesses, they were very devout, they were both recognised as prophets and they were both elderly, full of the wisdom and respect of age. Simeon, although not specifically called a priest, blesses Mary and Joseph. He also gives a further prophesy about the Messiah and the pain that will come to Mary. Their acknowledgement of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah happened very publically in the Temple, the very centre of Jewish life and worship, yet there was no acknowledgement from the Temple authorities. This was an acknowledgement from the godly remnant who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So Simeon, the prophet, explains to Mary and Joseph something of the glory of the person of the Messiah, and no wonder they marvel at what he says to them; for he says that the Messiah will have a ministry far beyond Israel, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles”, echoing Isaiah 49 “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6). In a few weeks this would have an immediate fulfilment in the visit of the wise men searching for the King of the Jews, (depending on where you fit the visit of the Magi). Simeon went on to bless them and say to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). Surely Simeon is seeing a fulfilment of Malachi 3 “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap” (Mal. 3:1-2). For some He brings joy, for others He brings judgement, for He will reveal the thoughts of many hearts. He will bring light but some will prefer darkness, so He will bring division.

Now I am intrigued by Simeon and Anna, this is the only reference to them in the whole of the Bible, yet they were very exceptionally godly people. Luke says that Simeon was righteous and devout, waiting expectantly for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. How many other people living in Jerusalem at that time could have such a description given to them? We are told that God, the Holy Spirit, had told him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah, the Anointed One. We don’t know when he was told that, days, weeks, months or even

years before, but he trusted in the God who had told him. He is a model to us of faithful trust, God has said and therefore I will trust Him to do it, even if it means waiting years. Perhaps he came every day into the Temple saying to God, “is this the day I will see Him?” And now picture the aged Simeon, taking the infant Jesus into his arms and almost crying “God you’ve done it, Your Messiah has come and here I am holding Him in my arms. What a faithful God You are, keeping Your promises to Israel, yet including even the Gentiles in Your purposes, for You want the whole world to benefit from Messiah’s coming”. You can almost see the tears of joy running down his beard. God had told him he would see the Messiah and here he is embracing him and holding him close to his heart, surely his heart was close to bursting with joy. “My own eyes have seen Him” he cries. Joseph was told to give the baby the name Jeshua, or Joshua, “because He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21) and here Simeon says “my eyes have seen Your salvation”. His very words echo what Joseph had been told. What encouragement to Mary and Joseph! And then the godly Anna comes in and joins in the rejoicing and the praise party. Anna is introduced as a prophetess, so she joins a relatively small number of women who carried this title in the Old Testament. Here were two godly people of impeccable character and devotion who together acknowledged the child as the Messiah.

So what can we learn from this passage, I want to suggest four things:

- 1) The meeting with Simeon was an all age encounter; Mary the young mother, the baby Jesus, Joseph, who tradition suggests was older than Mary, and the elderly Simeon, soon to be joined by the elderly Anna. Depending how you read the Greek text Anna could be in her eighties or over 100 years old. The Messiah brings people of all ages together, male and female.
- 2) The importance of perseverance in prayer – God had said and Simeon trusted for years maybe, but he carried on trusting. When perhaps others said it will never happen, Simeon said God has said and so I believe. He was unshakable in his conviction. Anna was too, they both looked forward for God’s deliverance. The book of Hebrews is full of encouragements to persevere in the faith e.g. “So let us seize *and* hold fast *and* retain without wavering the hope we cherish *and* confess, for He who promised is reliable *and* faithful to His word (Heb. 10:23 Amplified). It is so important we keep on going on in our faith and not to give up. We never arrive until we get to glory. If God has told you something or gifted something to you, believe that God will bring it about, don’t lose heart. As Barclay said “Age can take away the bloom and the strength of our bodies; but age can do worse – the years can take away the life of our hearts until the hopes that once we cherished die and we become dully content and grimly resigned to things as they are. it all depends on how we think of God. If we think of Him as distant and detached we may well despair, but if we think of Him as intimately connected with life, as having a hand on the helm, we too will be sure that the best is yet to be and the years will never kill our hope.”
- 3) There is a place for older people in the church, Simeon and Anna illustrate that well. Here at the very beginning of Jesus’ life, the old saints have a role. It is right to emphasise the ministry to children and to young people, but Simeon and Anna illustrate the role that older people can play in the church.

Their words of prophesy and confirmation to the young couple were so important. Their example of faithful service and witness was inspiring.

- 4) Simeon had a world vision. While others looked forward to a Messiah who would just be for the Jews, Simeon saw that God had a wider vision to the whole world. Jesus the Messiah would be the Saviour of the whole world. We see later in Luke's second book, the ever spreading out ripples of the gospel from Judea, to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Praise God it includes us but God's heart is to include all who will respond to His call of grace and mercy.

So as we enter the new year of 2018, let us remember –
The Messiah brings people of all ages together, male and female.
The importance of perseverance in prayer
There is a place for older people in the church
And, like Simeon, we need to maintain a world vision. Amen.