

Sermon 27th December – Dr Anne Shave

Last week I was speaking with a friend about the gospel reading for today, and I said how much I love this particular passage of Scripture.

I love imagining what it must have been like for Simeon and Anna to see this wee baby brought into the temple, and to realise that *this* infant was to bring salvation not only to the nation of Israel, but to all nations. How might they have felt when they recognised that they were witnesses to the fulfilment of so many Old Testament prophecies? What must Mary and Joseph have felt in hearing them speak of the joy, and also the sorrow, that lay ahead? What about bystanders nearby? What did they make of what they heard and observed?

My friend asked me what it was about this reading that I found so moving. In my conversation with her, I found it hard to put my thoughts into words - and I still do - because this reading, and particularly Simeon's actions and words, have a lot of resonances for me. Here are four ...

- There's something about the faithfulness of these elderly people - who had continued to pray and wait and long for God's salvation - there's something beautiful, and holy, about their devotion to God that touches me. One of the commentaries I read about this passage this week commented on the fact that a number of older people - described as devout and godly - feature in the Christmas story. Elizabeth and Zechariah and Simeon and Anna - they all cherish the hope of the Old Testament prophets and are looking forward to the future. To me, they are inspiring figures in their faith and devotion.
- Just picturing Simeon holding the little baby in his arms and giving thanks for him is beautiful - for me, it brings to mind countless baptisms in this church, when ministers pray for God to bless babies and their families, to be with them throughout their whole lives. So, at that level alone, I find this passage moving. But, of course, there is greater significance about the dedication of Jesus in the temple. If you were here on Christmas Day you will have heard Hamish commenting on the loveliness of God coming among us as a vulnerable baby. This passage has all that going on in it too.
- I am deeply touched by the sense of peace expressed by Simeon, the sense of completion he has, now that he has seen Jesus - "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace". I read somewhere this week: "Simeon's peace is not because he has a naïve notion that the Messiah will bring only joy and prosperity to his people. Simeon knows that Jesus will be spoken against, some will fall because of him. But his peace is in the assurance that God keeps his word, and somehow beyond the conflict that is to come salvation will prevail." It's lovely to savour that sense of peace, with Simeon, in the turmoil of our world.
- This prayer of Simeon's - the Nunc Dimitis, as it's called in Latin - also has some lovely associations for me as it is prayed regularly in Anglican services of choral Evensong. I imagine some of you will have attended services of Evensong in cathedrals in England, as well as here in New Zealand, as I have. In preparing for this morning's service I had a lovely time looking up on

YouTube various musical settings of this prayer, and enjoying some of the best choirs in the world sing Simeon's prayer. Those sorts of associations for me go beyond words and my attempts to explain them.

So those are some of my personal reactions to this reading.

But the *question* that I have been pondering this week as I have thought about this passage has been to do with *discernment* or "*seeing*" spiritually. How did Simeon (and Anna) recognise that Jesus was the promised Messiah?

I would like to suggest two interconnected answers to that question today.

First, Luke emphasises that Simeon is a man under the influence of the Holy Spirit. We are told that the Holy Spirit was with him, it is the Holy Spirit who gave the promise of revelation to him, and it is the Holy Spirit who leads Simeon to the temple at the right time. This continues an emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit that began in Luke 1. John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit while in the womb (1:15), Mary will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:35), Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and enabled to recognize the significance of Mary and her unborn baby (1:41), Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (1:67). We're reminded in a later chapter of Luke (Chapter 4) that it will be the Holy Spirit that rests on Jesus and enables his ministry (4:1-18).

So, the ability to "see" that Jesus is the chosen one of God is *given* to Simeon, by the Holy Spirit.

But secondly, both Simeon and Anna were waiting and watching for God's promises to be fulfilled. They were in the right place at the right time - not by accident, but because they were constantly there in the Temple. They were attentive to God. They had their eyes open. They *longed to see*.

It's not an "either or" situation. Simeon and Anna were sensitive to what God was doing because they were guided by the Holy Spirit and they were faithful in watching and waiting for his will to be done in them and among them. May that be true of us, also.

I would like to read to you a poem from Michael Mayne's book *Responding to the Light: Reflections of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*, Page 58.

John Taylor, for many years Bishop of Winchester, sent to his friends each year a Christmas poem. This one describes holding his grandchild in his arms before a bright candle on the Christmas tree.

Over the swinging parapet of my arm
 your sentinel eyes lean gazing. Hugely alert
 in the pale unfinished clay of your infant
 face,
 they drink light from this candle on the tree.
 Drinking, not pondering, each bright thing you
 see,

you make it yours without analysis
and, stopping down the aperture of thought
to a fine pinhole, you are filled with flame.

Give me, for Christmas, then, your kind of
seeing,
not studying candles - angel, manger, start-
but staring as at a portrait, God's I guess,
that shocks and holds the eye, till all my
being,
gathered, intent and still, as now you are,
breathes out its wonder in a wordless yes.

“Give me for Christmas, then, your kind of seeing.”