

CANDLEMAS 2 February 2020, Luke 2: 22-40.

CCO and StJN

Father, open our eyes, our hearts and our minds that we may perceive you wherever you come to meet us. Amen.

Those of you who have been to Evensong or taken part in Compline will immediately recognize the words of Simeon that we heard in our reading, the Nunc Dimittis, as it is known, the Latin words for "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace" as the old translation had it. Those words have been a part of daily Christian worship for some 15 centuries. Imagine that! So we must take them seriously.

Firstly, though, we need to remind ourselves that this episode is yet another instance of Mary and Joseph doing all that was required to fulfill the Jewish law of the day, it's another addition to Jesus' credentials as a good Jew. Jesus is moulded by his Jewish upbringing, and he never rejects it, but rather he SHOWS his people HOW God intended them to live the Law that he gave. And so Jesus is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, and there he meets two amazing people.

I just love these two old characters, Simeon and Anna. They are such a wonderful example to us, especially as we get older. They are people of such faith, lasting, enduring faith. And what excites me about this story is the fact that both of them, elderly and frail though they may be physically, are alive in the Spirit, truly alive. They are full of hope and expectation and joy!

And it's not as though they had any obvious reason to be so: Anna as a widow of many years will not have had an easy life. We are told that she was a prophetess – but I suspect that female prophets came off worse even than their male counterparts in those days! When have the prophets of God ever been respected?

But these two old folk were very much alive in the Spirit: they were looking for God's Kingdom, longing for it to come, they were waiting

faithfully, but with real expectancy. We had a lady in Christ Church who used to do the intercessions and often started the section on 'the world' with the words "We continue to pray for . . ." and then she would name some ongoing, intractable dire situation. And I used always to feel a bit uncomfortable, because it sounded a bit like a reproach to God: here we are again, Lord, STILL having to pray about this! Why haven't you got on and done something about it yet? Do you know what I mean?

I'm sure we all know that feeling. But what does it say about how we really feel about God? I'm reminded of the Psalms. Over and over the writers pour out their troubles to God, giving vent to their feelings and yet, almost always, they end up saying something like 'But I will yet praise the Lord for he is faithful.' The Psalms don't beat about the bush. They tell it like it is. But they are not just one long collection of moans and grumbles, because in the middle of all the darkness and difficulty there shines the light of hope, of confidence in the love of God.

Spending their days in the Temple, as they did, Simeon and Anna would have known the Psalms inside out and back to front. They were convinced that the God of Israel would not forget his promises and that they must keep alert and on the look-out for the great thing that God was going to do. They TRUSTED God. They were expecting God to do great things! Are you? In spite of all your setbacks, doubts, and questions, are you still looking out for the one who is the hope of us all? Are you helping others to trust in the promises and the good plans of God?

What does that trusting mean for us today? For us here in Christ Church and St John's just now, it certainly means trusting that God will provide us with a new vicar in due course! We might have to wait, to be patient and persevering, but we have to see THAT as an opportunity to grow. We have to move forward at God's pace, not try to set the pace ourselves. And we have to remember that so often we learn most while we're still on the journey, not just when we feel we've arrived.

It also means that at this critical time in our history as a nation, we have to trust that God's purposes can and will be worked out among us. The road ahead may not always be smooth; there are no magic wands that will remove all our problems. But we are called to trust that if, as a nation, we are truly seeking to do God's will and to find out what HE wants for us, then we shall see his kingdom come. Like Simeon, we may only catch a glimpse, but we shall know it when we see it.

Secondly, Anna and Simeon were truly FAITH-FUL PEOPLE. The Bible says that Simeon was "righteous and devout." Which does not mean that he was perfect. But it does mean that he stayed close to God. Luke tells us how Anna maintained her intimacy with God. She was in the temple day and night. She had established a daily rhythm of worship, prayer, and fasting that built up her spirit even when her body was getting old and beginning to break down. Frail on the outside, Anna was certainly strong in her inner self. Just a wrinkled old lady to look at, she clearly radiated an inner beauty. I hope you may have met people like that. Their outer shell is showing signs of age and decay, but their inner being is alive and kicking! The light of the Spirit of God is shining brightly within and shedding its light on those around them.

How do we get to be someone like that? How do we avoid becoming grumpy old men and women, full of complaints and moans, stuck in "Things ain't what they used to be" mode? Simeon and Anna show us the answer. To stay full of life, we have to have the life of God's Spirit within us, that stream of living waters, constantly being renewed, constantly flowing through us. How do we keep fresh and alert in our thinking? Well, we have to open ourselves to that stream of living water: we have to keep open the channels of communication between us and God. We have to be listening out for what he might be saying to us. We have to offer him, daily, our own hearts and minds as empty vessels to be filled with him. Do you have that daily spiritual discipline that Anna lived by? That regular rhythm of prayer and worship, and maybe even fasting if you can manage it? There

are no short cuts to the spirit-filled life. God offers us everything, but we have to be there, with him, to receive his gifts.

Then, like Simeon and Anna, we shall be SPIRIT-LED PEOPLE. Anna was a prophetess; that means that she was someone who EXPECTED to hear from God, and by the Spirit she could recognise when she had heard his word, and she was someone who dared to speak for God. Like so many of the wonderful women in Luke's Gospel, she is just an ordinary widow with no special qualifications or advantages in life, just an open heart and a listening spirit. And that means that God can use her. And he does. And Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon. Which means that Simeon went to places and did things as he sensed the Spirit was directing him.

The Spirit can lead us in different ways: we may feel prompted to make a visit, or a phone call or send a text message out of the blue, sometimes when we're not even sure why, just because we get that nagging little feeling that a particular person might just need to hear from us right now. In this church, we perhaps don't give the Spirit free-rein in our times of worship as much as we might: how would we feel about times of silent prayer, periods of listening, where we might wait and EXPECT God to show us something, or tell us something that we should share with the others? Do we actively ask God to give us the gifts of his Spirit? Not just for us to enjoy them, as individuals, but so that through them the whole body, the Church, might be built up, the community strengthened and guided.

Are you SPIRIT-LED like Simeon and Anna? Do you have a good word from God that others need to hear? Are you willing to go where God tells you to go? Is God calling you, like He called Simeon and Anna, to declare to others the true identity of Jesus, to help others prepare for what lies ahead? Does He want you to pass on a word of hope, of blessing?

Alongside the call for us to follow the examples of Simeon and Anna, there is a word of warning in this passage of what the cost might be.

Simeon recognizes in the baby Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the one sent by God to reconcile the world to God. And he recognizes that not everyone will welcome his coming, because many will feel threatened as his light shines into the dark corners of their lives.

We know we are called to follow our Lord Jesus. And we know that his way was not always easy. On the contrary. But, as Peter said to Jesus: "Lord, who else would we go to? You have the words of eternal life." We know that our Lord Jesus IS the way, the truth and the life. If there are answers to be found, we shall find them in him. We know that he shows us the Father, and that we can put all our trust in him. He does not abandon us, and his will WILL prevail ultimately. The more we, his followers, seek actively to DO his will, the sooner we shall see his kingdom breaking through into our lives, into our community, our nation, into this world. God IS working his purpose out, and he wants to use US to do so. We must EXPECT him to do so, young or old, and our lives should be characterized by that same excitement and expectancy that we see in Anne and Simeon. Just look at their faces!

At our Parish Prayers yesterday morning, Roy shared with us a couple of verses from Romans 12, which fit well with today's theme: 'Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.' In other words, be like Anna and Simeon! Amen.