

How often do we expect to hear from God? How often do we allow God to direct what we do?

These are the questions that struck me as I read our Gospel reading today. Let's spend a few minutes just looking at each of the characters involved.

Mary and Joseph had brought Jesus to Jerusalem. There were two requirements that they came to fulfil, both specified right back at the founding of the Jewish nation in the desert after the Exodus. The first relates to the killing of the first born son in every Egyptian family at the time of the passover. After this God stated that every first born male was to be dedicated to God, with animals being sacrificed and sons being redeemed by means of their life dedicated to God (Ex13). They were also there to recognise Mary ending her time of ritual uncleanliness, a period of 40 days, with an offering, in the case of Mary and Joseph two doves or young pigeons.

This would have been a time of celebration, recognising God's deliverance in bringing both mother and child safely through childbirth, as well as remembering God's deliverance of the nation from Egypt.

I doubt that they were expecting anything unusual to happen, they were just doing what they were expected to do by their religion.

Next to appear is Simeon, a "righteous and devout" man. He had received a promise from God that he would get to see the Christ before he died. We have no idea when he received this promise, but we are told that he was prompted by the Spirit to go to the temple that day.

What was he expecting? Was he expecting to see a mighty military leader? Was he expecting to see a charismatic teacher? Was he even expecting this promise to be fulfilled that day?

Whatever it was he was expecting, when he saw Jesus he understood that this was the fulfilment of the promise as he recognised Jesus as the Christ. His prayer of thanksgiving to God for this revelation is still repeated to this day, including as part of our Evensong service at St John's, as the Nunc Dimittis. It's a prayer of recognition, a prayer of praise and a prayer of thanks that God had kept his promises; his promise to Simeon to get a chance to see the saviour and his promise to bring salvation to the World.

Finally we meet Anna, a recognised prophet. This was a lady that spent her life praying and worshipping God, and what a life. The original text is not clear whether she was aged 84 or had been a widow for 84 years, making her over 100, but either way she had been focussed on God for the majority of her life.

She would probably have spent the majority of her time in what was known as "the Court of Women", the area closest to the holy of holies that women were allowed. It was an area about twice the size of Christ Church. In this area, she too was drawn to Mary and Joseph and the baby they carried.

Anna appears not to actually speak to Mary and Joseph directly, but she spoke to those around, telling them about Jesus.

What must Jesus' parents have made of this? They obviously knew that Jesus was special, the angel telling Mary she was pregnant would have been a big hint, but would they have expected such a reception when they went to the temple?

That leads me to our first reading today, Psalm 24. This is what is known as a psalm of ascents, and

would often have been sung by people on the climb up to Jerusalem, particularly at the time of Passover. It's a song recognising God's greatness as well as recognising that those that wished to approach God needed to be pure in heart. However, it's the last few verses I would like to look at.

“7 Fling wide the gates,  
open the ancient doors,  
and the great king will come in.

8 Who is this great king?  
He is the Lord, strong and mighty,  
the Lord, victorious in battle.

9 Fling wide the gates,  
open the ancient doors,  
and the great king will come in.

10 Who is this great king?  
The triumphant Lord—he is the great king!”

If Joseph and Mary had sung this as they climbed the hill to Jerusalem, did they make the connection between the baby they carried and the Great King they were singing about? After all the revelations of the day, would they ever be able to sing those words again without thinking of their son?

So, what can we take from our readings today and carry into our lives? I'd like to make 3 suggestions, but I'm sure there are others.

The first is that if God gives you a promise then you can rely on it. God will not break his word to us. Simeon had been promised that he would see the Saviour, the promised Messiah. God fulfilled that promise. We have received corporate promises of forgiveness and eternal life. Some of us will have received individual promises. Be assured that God will keep his promises.

The second point is that we need to be open to God's promptings. Simeon was prompted to go to the Temple that day 2000 years ago. Anna was given words about Jesus to speak to those around. We too will receive promptings from God. It may be a person that suddenly pops into our thoughts or a feeling that we should go somewhere, pray for something or someone. We have the option to ignore those promptings, but if we follow them we can receive, or pass on, a special blessing.

Finally, we need to be open to recognising God. Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna all recognised God in the baby being brought to be dedicated to God that day. While we will not get to see Jesus walking around Oakworth, if we are open we may be able to recognise where God is working through those around us.

So let's keep our eyes and hearts open and we may be amazed at what we see him doing in our village and in our lives.