

As a general rule, nobody normally thinks of the period after Christmas as a time of waiting. We've had that already – that was Advent – and you probably had a sermon about waiting, preparation, and how things lose their meaning if everything happens in advance. We're not much good at waiting these days. When life revolved around an agricultural cycle you had to wait, for seeds to grow and crops to ripen, for animals to give birth and livestock to fatten up. Apart from a certain amount of stone-clearing and weeding, watering, soil improvement and pest and predator suppression there wasn't much else you could do, and if you did intervene at the wrong time the effects could be disastrous. Our lives aren't like that. Time waiting is time wasted. We expect to have things now. Better to max out the credit card than to wait and save up. We've lost the habit of planning and preparing. It can't be entirely coincidental that when people had to wait and save up before they could get married there were fewer divorces (and it isn't just because divorce is much easier than it used to be). It's good that, despite everything modern science can do, we still have to wait nine months for a baby. Can you imagine the number of abandoned children there would be if you could simply pick up a baby at the weekend? Even our 'news' mostly isn't real news; it's people telling us what they think is going to happen. 'The budget next week will include...', 'A majority of MPs are expected to vote against...', 'Jo Root is unlikely to captain the next England test team'. Quite often we have lost interest and moved on before the hotly-anticipated event actually occurs – if it does. I'm not going to enter into any discussions about whether the Prime Minister will resign. But I am fairly certain that if he does it will feel like an anti-climax.

The last couple of years have forced us to do much more waiting than we'd previously been used to. Waiting in lockdown, waiting for vaccinations, waiting for restrictions to be eased, waiting to hug the family, waiting to go back to school or the office, to come back to church, to go on holiday, to go out for the evening, even to be allowed to sing. We have not known how long we would have to wait for each of these things, and it's been tough. Even if we have been protecting ourselves and each other, the uncertainty has been hard to cope with. Many people who had thought they could withstand just about anything found their mental health suffering badly. But it has only been a couple of years. Some of the people in our gospel today waited and hoped for a lifetime.

Joseph and Mary waited nine months for their baby, and then another forty days before coming to the temple. We have waited those forty days with them. Despite the profusion and confusion of celebrations occurring in the six weeks after Christmas, where we seem to ricochet through the early events of Jesus's life without any chronological consistency, there has still been an undercurrent of waiting. Our readings have shown him being revealed to a succession of different people as someone quite extraordinary: to shepherds, to Wise Men, to a bunch of servants, and to some 'unclean spirits' (people who were generally regarded as insane). Now, as Mary and Joseph come into the temple, two other people come quietly in as well. Finally, in a formal religious setting, the Messiah is revealed to two devout Jews, Simeon and Anna. Jesus's parents fulfil their religious obligations, buying their firstborn son back from God with a fee of two pigeons, and at the same time God fulfils the promise he made to his chosen people.

Surely, if God was going to show the Jews their long-awaited Messiah, he would make the announcement to the most important Jewish leaders, the men who would preach and teach the tremendous news, who would make significant pronouncements and guide their congregations and followers to understand this momentous event. But he didn't. It's worth noticing one tiny and often overlooked aspect of the Wise Men's visit. Not one member of the Jewish council that Herod summoned to tell him where the King of the Jews would be born had the curiosity to go with the Wise

Men and see. It was unnecessary. Their minds were closed. Those men had read the books. They were the people who knew the law and enforced the rules. They knew that the Messiah would be a king, a conqueror. They would know when the Messiah arrived.

God chose two very ordinary, quiet, faithful people to meet their Messiah in the temple that day. He had promised them that this would happen; they had believed him and had watched, waited and prayed, year after year. Simeon and Anna, a man and a woman, equal before God, represented the Jewish religion the way God wanted it to be. Jesus faced opposition from the religious leaders throughout his ministry. It was the ordinary people – the men and women in the pew, so to speak – who were open-minded enough to see, to believe what they saw, to praise God for his gift and to follow him. Did any of the temple priests see or hear something unusual that day? If they did, they couldn't be bothered to find out what was happening.

I am tempted to give a slightly different emphasis to Simeon's words. 'Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace.' Now – after all this time – your word has been fulfilled and my life has been worthwhile. For Simeon and Anna, both of whom were elderly, this was the culmination of lives of devout prayer and simple living. 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple', and he did. For Simeon the Messiah brought light to the world and glory to Israel. For Anna the redemption of Israel meant that the Jewish people were finally brought back into full communion with God. Two complementary perspectives on a single marvellous event – God incarnate in a tiny baby.

Our nativity scene has stayed in church for the whole of the Christmas season as a reminder to us of that same marvellous event. Now, Lord, I have seen your salvation. These words are for each of us, every day. If we look and hope and believe, we will find him waiting for us. And now we must take the words, and the hope, and the love, out into the everyday world, and spread it wherever we go and to everyone we meet.