

[This sermon begins with an extremely long pause.]

What am I doing? I'm making you wait. What does that feel like? Probably a bit uncomfortable? Maybe you're wondering if something has gone wrong. Is she OK? Should somebody do something? But you're not actually in control of events – and we all like to be in control of what's happening to us.

Come to that, I doubt whether anyone much likes waiting. It feels like wasted time, and the last thing we are supposed to do with time is waste it. There are some things that can make waiting a bit easier. Knowing when the wait will end helps a lot. Being given some information – when the train is expected to arrive, or what your position is in the call-centre queue, at least allows you to take back control, to decide to whether to stick around or not. And having a book to read, assuming you had the foresight to bring one, alleviates the tedium.

Today there is a special focus on two pretty ordinary people who turned out to be quite exceptional. The only reason that we know anything about them is that they were waiting. Both knew, in principle, what they were waiting for. But neither knew exactly what to look out for, neither of them got any updated information, and neither knew how long they would have to wait.

All we know about Simeon is that he was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and that the Holy Spirit rested on him. We probably picture him as an old man but that isn't necessarily the case; God had simply told him that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah.

There was a considerable amount of the consolation of Israel to look forward to. Simeon and Anna were living in very unsettled times. Just think what had happened during Anna's lifetime. She was eighty-four. When she was a young girl a Jewish King of Judea, Alexander Janneus, who, by the way, was probably largely responsible for the eventual hatred between the Pharisees and Sadducees, had six thousand Jews massacred during a religious festival. If that wasn't enough, a year or two later he had another eight hundred Pharisees executed while their wives and children watched – and then had the wives and children killed as well. That was a Jewish king murdering faithful Jews. Probably around the time that Anna was married, Pompey, a Roman general, invaded Jerusalem, broke down the temple walls and killed twelve thousand Jews. And by the time she had been in the temple for twenty years, seeing it being rebuilt around her, another cruel man became King of the Jews under overall Roman rule. This was Herod, who was Jewish by birth but not by observance or behaviour.

Anna must have lived in the temple for about sixty years. This was an extraordinary length of time for someone who wasn't part of the official temple priesthood. She was simply waiting, for the redemption of Jerusalem, for its re-establishment as the city of God and the fulfilment of the covenant between God and his chosen people.

But neither Simeon nor Anna knew what they were looking for. Given what they had experienced during their lives, they were probably expecting someone dramatic, impressive, powerful, overwhelming. They would have known the prophecies, like the one from Malachi that we heard a little earlier: 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple,,,,,but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?' Surely this must mean someone who could

stand up to the likes of Pompey or Herod, or whichever tyrant the Romans would put in place when Herod died? Alexander Janneus had been a king with a huge army. Pompey 'the Great' commanded legions of Roman soldiers with experienced generals. Herod 'the Great' had a Roman garrison at his disposal, and the co-operation of the Jewish religious leaders.

So the Holy Spirit prodded Simeon to go to the temple, and nudged Anna to come over, and they found themselves looking at a young couple with a baby; a couple so ordinary that they could not even afford a lamb, the usual temple contribution for a first-born son, and had brought the poor man's offering of a pair of pigeons. But because they had listened and waited, prayed and trusted God for so long, they both recognised what they saw. They had been faithful, and their faithfulness had been rewarded. 'Let me go in peace', said Simeon, 'Your word has been fulfilled'.

Nothing else was necessary. This was the Messiah. They had no idea how a six-week-old boy was going to bring about the redemption of Israel, but it didn't matter. Simeon did have a strong feeling that it would be a painful process, and said so. But neither he nor Anna asked any questions. Their job was done. They had listened and waited, and gone where God prompted them to go. They were the very first Jews, the chosen people in every sense, to whom God showed the Messiah. And unlike so many Jews who later demanded proofs, signs, wonders and miracles on demand, they were able to understand straight away exactly who it was that Mary and Joseph had brought to the temple.

Would you wait sixty years, or even sixty months, for anything, no matter how convincingly you had been told it would happen? What could possibly be so important that you would keep faith with the promise for that long? We can all see people getting tetchy after a few minutes when the bus doesn't come, or the traffic doesn't move, or the person ahead of us in the Post Office has a series of complicated bills to pay. If we are forced to wait for something, we check our phones, plug our headphones in our ears, tweet our annoyance, and look up occasionally to demand that 'they' tell us what's going on.

Do we leave any quiet space in our lives for God to get through? Who does all the talking when we pray? Have we any chance of hearing or feeling the Holy Spirit giving us the nudge that will lead us to see God? And if we do hear something, are we prepared to wait and to trust for as long as it takes? Next time you find yourself with an unexpected wait, this might be something to think about.