

Sermon for Candlemas Sunday 1st February 2015

Some people are better at waiting than others. I am quite good at it, though this is sometimes a mixed blessing. I once waited over two hours for a bus, convinced that all the buses that didn't come were just mysteriously "held up", rather than that I was standing in the wrong place.

Everyone in Luke's account of the coming of the infant Christ to the Temple for presentation has been waiting. For Mary and Joseph, who have been through the extraordinary experiences of the annunciation, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth, the visits of angels and shepherds, this is where they move back into the mainstream of their faith. And now forty days after his birth, in accordance with the Jewish Law, whoever this child is, he is going to be presented at the Temple like any other precious human gift of God. Mary and Joseph have certainly waited for this moment.

But the people we most associate with waiting in this story are the two people the Holy Family meet: Simeon and Anna. We are not told that Simeon is an old man, but we infer it from the verse which says he has been told he will not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. I do not think we are misguided to imagine an elderly man living and holding on for this day. Watching for its, (for His), coming.

We *are* told that Anna is old. She is eighty four years old. And if we imagine that she was married at around sixteen and lived as a wife for only seven years before her husband died, then she has been a widow for over sixty years when we meet her in the Temple.

Pictures, painted by artists and in our mind's eye, of these two elderly people, is of them waiting together in the Temple for this very moment. This fulfilment of their years. Certainly for Anna this is the case, as it appears she lives in the Temple. We learn that: "She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day." But in the case of Simeon it is different. Although it seems that he is either a priest or a senior religious figure in the life of the Temple in Jerusalem, he has not been waiting in there. We know this because Luke tells us: "Guided by the Spirit. Simeon came into the temple." We can assume that Simeon has been pursuing his everyday life, when he is led on this day to meet this couple and this baby. When Simeon takes the infant Jesus into his arms he says for the first time the wonderful words that the Church has repeated each night, the words of the *Nunc Dimittis*:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel."

The extraordinary power of these words comes from the collision of the personal and temporal with the cosmic and eternal. Jesus releases Simeon from his watching, and the whole creation from its darkness.

The sense we gain from Luke is that something in this encounter alerts Anna to what is happening and she joins in with the prophetic voicing of all that this child will be for the redemption of Jerusalem. There is also here the sense that Simeon goes to seek the fulfilment

of his and mankind's story while Anna has faithfully waited for it to be revealed to her where she is.

And so? And so, I think in these different watchings and waitings we have guidance for our own spiritual lives. Anna clearly felt called and fulfilled in her years in the Temple. But many of us may feel we have become stuck. We have been doing the same sorts of things in our spiritual lives for many years. And it may be that this same pattern is richly fulfilling and leads us deeper into our relationship with God and with each other. Or it may be that it isn't and hasn't for a while. We may not want to stretch very far from where we are now. We may feel now is not a good time to start thinking and praying outside our normal framework. That we have neither the time nor energy nor inclination to see what God might have for us round the next corner in our journey with him. That we might even find ourselves standing in the wrong place.

But in the Gospel today one other person is waiting. Jesus, long foretold by prophets, the one who in the words of our reading in Malachi. "will suddenly come into his temple." The one who in the beginning was with God and was God. The one who left with us his Holy Spirit to hold us close and direct us in the ways of his love. The same Holy spirit who led Simeon to the Temple and gave Anna her voice. Both Simeon and Anna waited in different ways, but for both of them the quality of their waiting, was active. Being open, ready and alert to the new things God was doing and showing them. And just as much as they were waiting for him, he was waiting for them. And he is waiting for us.

Lots of things in life can stop us looking forward like Simeon or looking properly at where we are like Anna. Current worries and concerns can certainly shorten our range of inner vision. Grudges, unspoken resentments, regrets and fears can all also tie us to where we have been too long, and impede us as we try to move on. The promise and fulfilment of Candlemas is Light. The Light of Christ shining in our darkness.

Today as we take away the Christmas crib and complete the Christmas season we have seventeen days before the start of Lent. It might well be that we need to dig a little deeper into all the things we already do, to allow the power of familiar prayers and readings to dawn on us anew. Or perhaps to reach beyond where we are now and make a new commitment and connection to the things of our faith. Perhaps this is the time to change where we are standing with God. To actively, read, pray, think, seek and ask what is it he wants to show us, tell us and be in us. To know what it is it we are really waiting for after all.

Amen

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