

Simeon and Anna

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 28th January 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

Light at the end of the tunnel

Who here has been on a canal boat holiday? Have you ever been on a canal boat going through a tunnel?. They can be very long, going through a hillside. And there's often only room for one boat to go through at a time.

The tunnels are very dark – there's no light in them, so you have to turn on the headlight at the front of the boat. When you start the end looks very far away – only a speck of light in the distance. But as you get nearer, the light gets bigger and nearer, until you come out into the sunshine on the other side of the tunnel.

Candlemas

Today we are celebrating the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, traditionally known as Candlemas. Perhaps the key theme in the Gospel story is that Jesus is the Light of the world, an image which comes from Simeon's prophetic poem which he speaks out as he holds the infant Jesus in his arms. This child, he says, is

a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.¹

¹ Luke 2:32 NRSV

Traditionally the celebration includes the lighting of candles, representing the light of Christ, and in some traditions worshippers are given a blessed candle to take home.

Light in the darkness

At times the world can seem like a very dark place, and with all the wars going on in parts of the world, with cost of living rises and the threat of climate change, we may feel this is a very relevant metaphor. It is certainly the background to our gospel reading. The Jewish people had been waiting for hundreds of years for God to help them and give them freedom from the powerful nations around them. They were hoping that one day God would send a king, the Messiah, to save them. It was a bit like going through those tunnels on the canals – it was all dark, but with the eye of faith some could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

This was certainly true of the two elderly people in our story. There's a rather nice contrast here: a young couple with their first baby come into the Temple, to perform a ceremony related to the beginning of a new life. They are met by two people nearing the end of their lives: Simeon, who from his own words must be old and is expecting to die soon, and Anna, a widow eighty-four years old. Both have had a revelation from God: this child is the hope for the future, the one who has been sent not only to set his people free, but to bring light to the whole world.

I think there are two lessons for us to take away from this story, which I'll summarise in the words *Waiting* and *Watching*.

Waiting

The Jews had been waiting a long time for their promised Messiah to come. Luke tells us that Simeon was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel”, and that Anna spoke of the child “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” We are not told how long Simeon and Anna had been consciously thinking about this, but it seems that they had both independently been meditating on God’s promises and praying for them to be fulfilled, no doubt for years. And though they were now nearing the end of their lives, they had not given up on God answering their prayers, even if they didn’t live to see how he would do it.

We may not have had the experience of seeing Jesus in the flesh, as Simeon and Anna did, but we have so much more than they had to inspire our faith, as we patiently wait for God to bring about the fulfilment of his Kingdom and the end of suffering and injustice. We have the gospels to tell us about the Saviour – his life, teaching, death and resurrection. Like Simeon and Anna, we can know the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to open our eyes and help us discern the light at the end of the tunnel. Are we willing to hang in there with God, to trust him for our future and the future of the world?

Watching

And this is my second point: Simeon and Anna were both *watching* for God to act. They were people of prayer, people whose lives reflected their devotion to God. They knew the scriptures, they made prayer and worship a high priority in their lives, and so their minds were open to see God at work.

Imagine you are Simeon. What did you experience when you woke up that morning? Just another day? But wait! You have a strong sense that something momentous is going to happen today. You need to go to the Temple. God wants to show you something – but what? Could today be the day when God’s promise to you will come true – that you will see the Messiah with your own eyes?

What Simeon and Anna saw on that day was just another ordinary couple bringing a very ordinary-looking baby into the Temple for a routine ceremony, forty days after his birth. But that baby was the answer to their prayers, and the hopes of the nation.

Do we think that way? When you wake up in the morning, are you open to God’s presence with you, and to the possibility that you might see or hear of God working? It could be in small answers to prayer, or hearing on the radio or television of good work being done by individuals or charities to relieve suffering. It could be a sense that God is with you as you go for a walk, do household chores, or meet up with someone. It could be in an opportunity to say a friendly word to a stranger, or thank someone who served you in a shop or doctor’s surgery, or do a “random act of kindness”. God can speak to us through prayer, through the Scriptures, through hearing something on the radio, through words from another person that seem to address exactly your situation you are facing. And a word or action that seems small could, like the baby in the Temple, have a significance far greater than you could imagine.

Watching for God also includes being open to see the possibility of God being at work in the tragedies and disasters of life too. Simeon warns Mary that her son

is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.²

And yet the rejection and unjust execution of Jesus, which was to bring Mary indescribable pain, was the means by which God brought about the salvation of the world. Don't underestimate the good that God could bring out of a seemingly impossible situation.

A message of hope

Candlemas reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the world, and as John wrote in the opening of his gospel,

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.³

The example of Simeon and Anna reminds us to put our trust in God, to take time to pray and worship, so that we may grow closer to him, and be open to seeing and hearing him at work in the world. As they were guided by the Holy Spirit, so let us also be filled with the Spirit, so that we can carry the light of Christ into each day, and to all those we meet. Amen.

² Luke 2:34-35 NRSV

³ John 1:4-5 NIV