

Morning Praise @ Home 28th January 2024

Opening prayer

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

Confession Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and repent. Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin. Renew a right spirit within us and restore us to the joy of your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
cf Psalm 51

Absolution May the Father of all mercies cleanse *us* from *our* sins, and restore *us* in his image to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Bible Reading

Luke 2:22 – 40

Reflection from Sue

Epiphany: Faith and light

This January the light levels have often been quite low and we've needed to switch the lights on, even in daytime. When an unexpected shaft of sunlight breaks through, it lifts and illuminates everything – but otherwise, we trudge on, the mess of the world getting messier, oppressive forces more aggressive – and we can't always see how God is fixing any of it.

As Luke's Gospel unfolds, the Jews had been waiting to hear directly from God for 400 years, hoping that they would be released from the grind of life under oppressive occupiers. They'd stopped having much of a voice on the world stage, were no longer a force to be reckoned with, just as Christians might feel today that contemporary culture sidelines the church's teachings.

- What of God's promises of power, rescue and glory for the Jews?
- What about our hope of healing, for miracles, today? Have we just learnt to settle for drab days, stopped looking for God's sunlight?

Today's reading should be a jolt to our expectations, for, in the midst of years of routine, God's light breaks through: news of a promise both fulfilled - and extended - sparkles out through the hearts and words of two faithful believers, Simeon and Anna.

Why did God choose these elderly worshippers for that moment of blinding light? What can we learn from them if we too want to see God afresh?

1. Firstly, they lived their daily lives as an act of worship - Simeon is described as 'devout', whilst Anna lived in the sight of God in the Temple - and this constant exposure to God had drawn them closer to Him.
2. Secondly, Simeon and Anna's words demonstrate that they knew and held on to the Scriptures – Simeon is expecting the 'consolation of Israel', that is, a rescuer, or Messiah, for the Jews, his words about baby Jesus being 'a light for the Gentiles' directly echoing Isaiah; whilst Anna, herself a prophetess, looked forward to the long-promised 'redemption of Jerusalem'.

Because God's law and His prophets lived in these elderly Jews' minds and hearts, it meant they could understand how God was fulfilling Scripture in the child before them.

- Do you long for God to do a 'new thing'? The more familiar we become through our Bibles with how God operates, the more we can recognise how He is working today.

3. However, simply knowing God's Word meant little without Simeon and Anna maintaining their passionate hope, based on trust in God's promises. Simeon refers to God as a 'Sovereign Lord', who keeps His promises. Despite 400 years of apparent silence, the two still lived expecting that God would speak.

So they waited ... and waited on God. They must have prayed, longing for prayers to be answered, but, when the response was 'not yet', they still kept faith with God's timing. What a difference to our instantaneous, click-button culture, where we so easily get frustrated when things don't happen as soon as we feel they need to!

4. Finally, both these elderly believers were alert to the Holy Spirit. Anna's prophetic role was Spirit inspired, whilst we are told that 'the Holy Spirit was upon' Simeon. What's more, they both obeyed His prompting. In v27 we read: 'Moved by the Spirit, Simeon went into the Temple courts' just as Mary and Joseph appeared. It's no coincidence that Anna also came 'up to them at that very moment'. When God nudged them, they didn't delay or make excuses but acted on His guidance.

So, what do Simeon and Anna show us? That the more we worship, know God's word, are patient people who keep trusting in God and who obey the promptings of His Spirit - the more we'll see the light of God's activity and glory in today's world.

But God's glory doesn't come cheap. What Simeon and Anna encountered was both greater and more mysterious than expected:

- The message was not just about rescuing the Israelites but that the glory of the infant Saviour was to shine for the Gentiles, those pagans whom the Jews regarded as enemies! That wasn't the sort of glory Israel wanted!
- Simeon's inspired words also pointed to the shadows cast by the light. Instead of the victorious Messiah figure the Jews hoped for, Simeon prophesied that people would fall because of Jesus, that God's sign of love would be rejected, that pain and suffering were involved for not only this special child but His family too. Christ's searching light would expose the thoughts (and failings) of everyone - which wasn't the sort of revelation faithful Jews expected!

You see, suffering is bound up in the glory. As God comes to live in a fallen world, so He takes on board pain and death, illness and persecution. God reveals here that there is no gain without pain. Are we prepared for the shadows that are cast by the powerful light of Christ?

We know that what Simeon prophesied happened:

- Jesus was a stumbling block to most Jews, and His own 'falling' at the Cross, before rising to a heavenly body, has been the fate of many of His followers.
- While Jesus' life demonstrated the fulfilment of God's kingdom, He went to His death isolated and scorned. When Christians today try to make a difference for the sake of the kingdom, the same fate can await them.
- There is no longer room for neutrality: the challenge of Christ's life, and now the lives of all believers, has to lead to uncomfortable decisions – accept Jesus or reject Him, follow Him or fail Him. The searching light of Christ leaves no room to hide.

This is what was revealed to Simeon and Anna about the baby Jesus, and we too are the inheritors of that shining, challenging moment: as Paul writes in Eph 5:8: 'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light...'

In 'olden days' this Sunday, with its focus on light, was called 'Candlemas'. Pre electricity, it was traditional for people to bring their ordinary light source of wax or tallow candles to church for a blessing. Then they returned home, with daily symbols (each time they lit them) of how the light of Christ defeats the darkness.

What would it look like for our daily lives to be lit up in the same way, to be living signs of Christ? Think: in what ways can we -

- offer a bigger vision to our neighbours than they are anticipating?
- excite work colleagues and friends about living in the light?
- share in the suffering of those who feel a sword is piercing their soul?

The Lord's saving light needs to be visible now, transforming our gritty daily life, through the Holy Spirit experienced now, lived now, shone now.

Like Simeon and Anna, we need to live in such a way that we can join with them as witnesses of God's surprising, costly, dazzling 'salvation'. **Amen**

Affirmation of faith

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.

This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Prayers of intercession

Heavenly Father we pray that the light of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ will shine in our lives and the lives of people of all races throughout the world so that wars may cease and those in need be satisfied. We pray for the will to always work for peace and be generous with our time and our money so that others may know your love.

We pray for those in any kind of need. Especially we bring to you in prayer those whom we know or know of, who are ill in body, mind or spirit. Pour your Spirit of healing and peace upon them, that they will become whole in the way most appropriate to their circumstances. Bless also Lord those in need who we do not know, those whom society may have forgotten. May they come to know your love and healing in their lives.

We remember in our hearts those whom we love and who have died. We give thanks for the gift of life and for good examples set by those we love but see no more. As we look forward with hope, we know we have your love. We ask that we may help bring your love to those who have lost loved ones, remembering at this time the families and friends of Jenny Dodman and Jocelyn Barnes.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

The Lord's Prayer As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen

Closing prayer

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**