



Isaiah 61.10-62.3

Luke 2.22-40

27th December 2020 Sunday after Christmas

Voices from the Margins

First Talk

My name is Simeon and along with Anna, we were one of the first people to see the Lord's Christ.

They were very young when we first saw them and nervous looking, Mary and Joseph that is. But the temple does that to people you know. It has an aura about it, and we feel it in our hearts every time we enter it. Anna feels it so much she never leaves, she lives here with other members of her Order.

I come and go, but I'm always around, waiting. I had something of a vision, years ago now, that I would not die until I saw God's promised one. This second half of my life I've had to live with a patience that doesn't really come naturally to me, waiting and trusting. And today, well I held the Christ child in my arms, I was shaking with the deepest joy and could hardly keep back the tears, but I don't think Mary was too alarmed. I prayed over the baby a blessing as our tradition requires. It was the most profound moment of my entire life, one so full of hope and joy as I sensed that God had truly come among us.

The parents looked exhausted, but don't they always! And I don't suppose just because your child holds the Christ light that it makes any difference at 3 in the morning when he needs a feed!

It was their deep sincerity that struck me. They wanted everything done properly. They were doing their very best for their son. Incredible isn't it, that the story of our salvation is wrapped up in the story of a family and we all sense we know it, feel it and are part of it. God really did come among us in a way we understand and

appreciate.

But, if I'm honest, I wonder if these two young people who had gone through so very much really understood. They were doing so well, but as Anna and I talked with them they looked astonished at all we said.

Perhaps it's because we are old – and I dare to hope wise too! Well, it would be nice to be thought of as wise – but maybe not everyone thinks that of us. Anna and I are sometimes thought of as 'The Quiet in The Land'. We are the ones who have kept a light of hope shining that soon God will send us his chosen one. We've kept vigil, as it were, praying and longing for this coming, and perhaps we've been doing that for longer than Mary and Joseph have been alive. We've had more time to think it through, perhaps that was why they were so full of wonder at what we had to say. I think that's why older folk are always worth a listen, we've had a long time to mull things over.

The baby was given the name Jesus. In our understanding that means Saviour. My heart was in my mouth as I held him. So much expected of him and I know he'll not only thrill and challenge many, bringing comfort and hope, he'll also disappoint a few who'll be expecting a different kind of Saviour. My waiting has taught me that in all this we need an open heart to God's message and his messenger. He will show us the way, not the way we thought maybe, but God's way.

I was glad to share the moment with my friend Anna – one of the finest preachers I know, a real prophet, good with words as she speaks from the heart. It's like we've been prayer partners for decades.

Have you noticed this Christmas how Luke always seems to write the story in couplets of people. There's Mary and Joseph, of course, and Elizabeth and Zechariah, John's Parents. Also, Mary and Zechariah form a sort of duet, both singing songs to God after the visit of the angel. It always seems to be in twos with Luke. And then, last, but certainly not least, there's Anna and me.

Someone said to me the other day that most of our religious hierarchy is filled with men yet look at the Christmas story. Where would it be without Mary, Elizabeth and Anna? God speaks through us all, uses us all.

I was glad to share this moment with Anna, she's 84 now yet still full of hope. She prayed with the family and thanked God that in their child she saw liberation, freedom and a new peace dawning.

Well, I don't want to bore you this morning – I must come over all rambling like because, to be honest, I'm still walking on air, so thrilled to have been part of this precious encounter. So, as I'm not quite as young as I once was, I'll take a little rest now and say a bit more in a few moments time. So, don't go away! (Perhaps we could have another listen to those nice Chancel Singers!)

2nd Talk

Welcome back to the Temple. A place where we meet God, and he meets us. And today, as Anna and I stood alongside Mary, Joseph and Jesus there was such a sense of the presence of God with us. For the first time in many decades, I feel I can truly pray: *Lord, let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation.*

You know I guess in the future it would be easy for readers of Luke's gospel to think he was writing a biography of Jesus. Well, if that was the case, he really was very selective about what he put in, because the truth is that most of Jesus' life isn't actually chronicled.

No, I think Luke wasn't writing biography but a passionate book about why Jesus's life really mattered, so he carefully selects specific events that reveal something important about the life that will be lived by the baby I held in my arms today.

You know Mary was, if anything, over keen to bring Jesus in to see us this morning. There are lots of rituals surrounding the birth of children in our tradition, but it isn't strictly necessary, not according to the Torah, anyway, to bring a first born specifically to the Temple.

Mary and Joseph, as it were, went over and above in what they did today.

I suspect it was intended to remind us of another story in our tradition, of Hannah taking her son, Samuel to the shrine and dedicating his life to the Living God. We love that story, one about commitment and a 110% loyalty to God. And I think we saw something similar today and I think the events Anna and I were part of in the Temple will make it into Luke's gospel because he'll want this emphasis on dedication. That's what today was all about really – Jesus being dedicated to God, eventually growing up to become the one who showed us what committed service to God and neighbour really looks like.

Today's events were more about theology than biography, teaching us something about dedication, love and faithfulness. The sort shown by God to Jesus, and the kind Jesus will eventually show towards God.

It's been a great day and I'm amazed that a couple of oldies like Anna and me were chosen to be part of it but, you know, I sense a theme developing here.

So much of this Christmas story is about God using people at the margins. It was obvious to us, when we saw them, that Mary and Joseph live on the margins. They could only afford a pair of turtle doves as an offering to mark the event. That's the option reserved for the poorest in society. So, whenever you read of Mary in her Magnificat, or Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount talk of God raising up the poor and lowly, this isn't theoretical for them. Jesus and Mary were poor.

But it's not just about money. In the Christmas story women find a voice, shepherds are given an honoured place and people like Anna and I give the blessing, not the great High Priests.

Bringing people into the centre, who once felt excluded, I think it will be a feature of Jesus' ministry and it seems to have started right here in the unfolding of the Christmas story.

And that's something I'll take away from today. The day an 'outsider' like me felt for once like an 'insider'. Not many people return from the Temple remembering Anna and me. Instead, they talk about the senior clerics in their flamboyant robes, the great antiphonal singing by the best choir in the country and the awe-inspiring architecture of one of the largest buildings in the land. But not today.

Today God spoke through a young couple just starting out on family life and an old couple at the end of our journey yet still travelling hopefully. And most of all he spoke in the promise of a new-born. So often we miss these voices, yet at Christmas they speak the main lines.

May God's Shalom rest upon you my good listeners. As you emerge from all your waiting in a year when I believe your patience has had to grow with each succeeding month may you hear God speaking and see him acting through a kaleidoscope of people and messengers as you travel from the old towards the new, from the sunset of 2020, to the dawn of 2021, for God uses both the young and the old to share his message of love and life, of salvation and liberation. From an old man, now at peace and ready to meet his maker, Shalom my friends, Shalom.

Ian Green, Amersham, December 2020