

This Gospel reading featuring two elderly people of God, Simeon and Anna (two “senior saints” as some would term them), brings to my mind a couple of women from an earlier time in my ministry. These women coincidentally shared the same Christian name – for the sake of discretion I’ll refer to them as “Sarah” – and both of them had quite severe health issues that prevented them taking much part in the activities of the Church. They were however people who were diligent in prayer, much like Anna, albeit praying at length in their own homes rather than in the Temple.

In our Gospel passage this morning Mary and Joseph go to the temple to fulfil what is required by ancient Jewish piety after the birth of their son, Jesus. Two things are expected, and both are referred to here while not being explicitly spelled out:

- Firstly, after a birth the woman was considered unclean for seven days and then for a further thirty-three days should keep away from holy things. After the total of forty days had elapsed, the woman should offer a sacrifice of a lamb and a dove or pigeon, or if she is poor, then the lamb can be replaced with a second bird. In some parts of Judaism such ritual impurity could also attach to the infant also.
- Secondly, the law of Moses required that a mother’s firstborn son should be offered up to God, and then redeemed by the payment of five shekels.

Neither of these rites necessitated a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem: they could have been performed in Bethlehem or Nazareth or any other village. It seems that Mary and Joseph had a particularly heightened religious sensibility. However, if they were to go into the temple and to take Jesus with them, then it was essential that they all be ritually pure.¹

¹ What exactly Luke recounts as the requirements and what actually would have happened is a subject of much debate. See discussion of this in Thiessen.

Simeon, a man empowered by the Holy Spirit, is inspired to go to the temple courts that day. He is waiting, we read, for “the consolation of Israel”, he is waiting for the Messiah. Also in the temple is Anna, an elderly prophet, who worshipped night and day. She too is waiting for the Messiah, it seems, for Luke records that when she sees the child she gives thanks to God and speaks about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

What might this expectation of the Messiah have involved?

Certainly it involved consolation – the release of Israel from its oppressors and comfort after its trials.

But Jews who had been attentive to prophecy about the Messiah would also know that the coming of the Messiah meant judgement. If Israel was to be restored as a free nation, then it would be restored as a free nation under God. For Israel true freedom could only mean freedom under God’s rule, and that meant it must be rid of ways which are not of God.

The passage we heard from Malachi 3 this morning takes up this theme. Malachi was written when the Jews had returned to Jerusalem after Persia had overthrown Babylon and had freed the Jews from exile. The Jews built a new temple to replace the one that had been built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians. They thought that being back in Jerusalem and worshipping in the temple again would bring them freedom and prosperity. However, they were not truly free as they were a vassal territory of the Persian empire, they suffered from drought and famine, and they were surrounded by enemies. Their dream was not being fulfilled and they started to doubt God’s justice.

When they ask “Where is the God of justice?”, God replies, through his prophet Malachi, that he will first send his messenger, and then will come himself.

But his coming is not all beer and skittles.

You want to see the justice of God, says Malachi, then you’ll see it in all its fullness – and it means that *you* have to be just and upright also. God is to be honoured and

obeyed in all aspects of life – in worship and in morality. Malachi warns the Jews, you will be judged; God is seeking repentance.

So now, as they wait for the Messiah, Simeon and Anna wait for one who will come as warrior to overthrow the oppressors, and as judge to correct the nation and bring it back under the rule of God.

It is a both-and kind of thing: saviour and judge. It is a pair that always needs to be held together: if we preach only a judge, then we are all condemned; but if we preach only a saviour, then how is the world to be put to rights, how is the evil in the world to be overcome?

So Simeon and Anna wait for the Messiah, the warrior-saviour, the judge.

And they see all this in a little baby, a baby just 40 days old??

Surely we would expect Anna and Simeon to have waited until things were a little more obvious before declaring that their wait for the Messiah is over. So many died in childhood – aren't they risking embarrassment? Why not wait until this baby grows into a man of promise; wait until he has started to gather his army; waited until he has fulfilled one of the prophetic acts thought to be signs of Messiah; or if they were really cautious, waited until his messianic reign began?

But, no, here having merely viewed the little child, Anna gives thanks to God and speaks about the infant Jesus to all those looking forward to the redemption of Israel. And Simeon pronounces himself satisfied that his search is over, and announces that he is content to die. His life's work is complete; he can step aside.

Certainly Anna and Simeon are full of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit's inspiration that allows them to recognise the long awaited Messiah in this baby. But all that

wouldn't have been possible if they had not been waiting, looking, expecting the Messiah to be revealed.

And they are also open to God doing a new thing: their attitude seems to be one of an open expectancy. For example, here Simeon, unlike many of his fellow Israelites, recognises that the salvation brought by Jesus is for all peoples – it is not the exclusive privilege of his people, but is also for the Gentiles.

Some years ago, I bought a Ford Laser hatchback. Until I saw it in the salesyard I don't think I'd ever noticed that model on the roads before. After I'd bought it, I saw them all over the place.

Have you ever had that kind of experience?

What we notice is influenced by our expectations.

Simeon and Anna saw in this baby the promised Messiah because they expected that one day they would see the Messiah. They were tuned into and open to the activity of God in this way.

To what extent are we expectant, looking for the activity of God, the presence of Christ, in every situation, in each person?

It is too easy for us to miss what God is doing, because we can be too caught up in looking for faults and weakness and sin in others and evil in the world around us. Yes, we need to be aware and prayerful, and working for righteousness and justice and so on; but sometimes we can be so focussed on the bad that we become blind to the good.

It is too easy for us to miss what God is doing because we only expect the activity of God to occur in certain places or in certain ways. Christians can be just as bad as the Pharisees were in Jesus' day in being blind to any activity of God that doesn't fit their preconceived notions of what God's activity should look like and where it should occur. There are still pockets of the church's membership that seem to believe that the only valid ministry and mission is that undertaken by the clergy; and we still tend to have a mindset that the place ministry is to be exercised is within the church, and among the body of Christ.

I want to see all the faithful more and more equipped to exercise their ministries wherever they are, in workplaces, colleges, homes, clubs, on the street, ..., wherever.

But you might find this, together with my urging last week that we be more determined and faithful fishers of people, hard: too demanding, and unrealistic of you – because of your stage of life, for example.

My two Sarah's – both of advancing years, and both infirm – both spoke to me at different times about how frustrated they felt, how they felt they were letting God and the Church down because they couldn't *do* anything; they had no ministry.

My response was, on the contrary they did indeed have a ministry.

Those unable to go and actively fish have the kind of ministry exemplified by Anna and Simeon. This is a ministry of faithful prayer; of faithful watching for the new work of God; and of faithfully embracing the cost and loss that might be involved in that new work.

We intercede for the world, for this nation, for this city, for our neighbourhood, for friends and family; praying that all would come to accept Christ Jesus as Lord. We watch out for signs of God's activity, and we celebrate what God is doing – even when this doesn't look like what we expected. And, at times, that involves giving way on our expectations of how things are done or hopes for what might occur.

Personally, one of the best things I did for the parish of Whanganui was to hand over the leadership of the mid-morning congregation to the talented young couple who, as

it turned out, would succeed me as vicar two years later. It hurt in many ways to relinquish that role: but it was absolutely the right thing to do, because through Billy and Caleb God was able to work something new and right for the season. My two Sarah's didn't get to see the renewal of local worship in the form that they were used to or comfortable with. But they supported what happened, and celebrated it, because they could recognise that God was answering their prayers for renewal in God's own fresh way.

Anna prays "night and day". Simeon speaks of the "falling and rising" of many. These words seem back-to-front from the phrases we usually expect. But this back-to-front way is perhaps a helpful metaphor, speaking of the topsy-turvy way of God's kingdom. And, with the prophecy of the sword that will pierce Mary's heart, we are reminded of the strange way that God brings about his purposes: through weakness, through apparent failure, through humility, through the cross.

I don't know what yet what God is going to be doing with and among and through us St Peter's people. But my hope is that we will all be open to it when it becomes apparent.

During this year, resolve to expect to see God at work, in surprising ways among unlikely people – yes, even the people sitting on either side of you; yes, even you! Resolve to see God at work in others, and resolve to affirm and celebrate what God is doing and to join in with it.

Sources

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