

Brancepeth Sermon: Anna's Eyes

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Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always. Amen

This is a sermon about Anna –
not a sermon about our Anna,
but a sermon about Anna, the daughter of Phanuel,
of the tribe of Asher.

It's a sermon about Anna, about where she stood,
and about what she saw.

The scene is Mary and Joseph's trip
to offer the appointed sacrifice for their first-born son.
So we are in the temple in Jerusalem,
at the heart of Jewish life.

But I don't want you to picture a scene of calm and reverence,
of airy spaces and hushed tones.

Instead, I want you to imagine the noise, the bustle, the chaos.

You have Mary and Joseph here with their new-born baby,
but they are here with many other couples,
many other swaddled babies.

They are there in the throng,
jostling all the other struggling families, waiting their turn.

And then there are the doves, the pigeons,
the other animals being brought in, being bought and sold,
going on their way to sacrifice.

The squawks, the beating of wings, the mess, the smell.

And most of these animals are being slaughtered,
just one court further in – not far away at all –
so you can add all the sounds and smells
of an overstretched abattoir
to the mix.

And Mary and Joseph haven't done this before.
They don't know quite where they are meant to stand,
who they are meant to talk to, what the process is.

So I want you to imagine the bewilderment, the anxiety,
the noise and colour and stink.

And then you need to imagine the strange encounters –
first with the old man Simeon, who has approached them
and said his piece
'Mary and Joseph were amazed', we're told.
They did not know how to respond,
they did not know what it all meant.

Already bewildered, already uncomfortable,
in the midst of all this mess and din
they now have words of glory, and revelation, and salvation
spoken about their baby.

And Mary – this young woman,
barely more than a child herself,
carrying her crying baby in the midst of all this deafening fuss
– has been told that *a sword will pierce her soul*.

And before she has time to recover,
someone even older, even stranger,
the woman Anna, approaches.

You shouldn't at this point picture
a figure commanding immediate respect,
an impressive figure, a figure of substance.

This is not someone with power.
This is not someone surrounded by hushed reverence.

For a start, this is a woman,
so this is someone only allowed into this outer court of the temple,
kept at a distance from the altar, from the work of the priests,
from the real business of the temple.

And this woman is old –
and, yes, perhaps this is a culture that respects age
a little more than ours tends to do,
but you shouldn't assume that a widow of eighty-four
would come in for much of that respect.

Think of all the instructions there are in the Bible
about showing mercy to widows and orphans –
like our reading from Malachi, for example.
You don't need all those instructions
unless there's a problem –
unless widows tend, most of the time, to be left unsupported,
left at the margins.

So imagine Anna as a woman
used to being patronised and dismissed,
not as someone of substance,
not as someone whose opinions count.

But of course she *is* described as a prophet,
and surely that means something!
Surely that means we're talking about
someone with real presence,
someone who can command attention?

Well, maybe.

But think back to the Old Testament.

In 1 Sam 19, there is a strange story about
Saul coming to find David.

When he approached,

'the spirit of God came upon him...

he fell into a prophetic frenzy ...

He ... stripped off his clothes, and ...

fell into a frenzy before Samuel.

He lay naked all that day and all that night'

Calling Anna a prophet might not mean that
she was known for her powerful statements of God's word –
her inspired insight, her poetic words.

It might mean that people saw her as
someone who had been struck off balance by God,
so that she didn't fit normal, polite patterns of behaviour.
It may mean that she was someone uncanny,
someone disturbing,
someone prone to rant and rave,
a disturber of the peace, someone *indecent*.

And think about it.

She inhabits the temple, she never leaves it, she haunts it.

She takes things to extremes –

her whole life a life of prayers and fasts.

She's one of the fixtures of the temple precincts:

strange Anna, disturbing Anna,

Anna who lives at an angle to other people's lives –

Anna of the margins.

In the midst of the noise, the smell, the crowds, the confusion,

Mary and Joseph are approached by this marginal woman.

She sees the baby,

and she *knows* –
and she begins to praise God.

This is not a quiet word with the parents,
not a carefully expressed message
of encouragement and confirmation.
No. She's calling out, she's drawing attention.
She's making yet more noise
in an already cacophonous setting.
She begins to speak about the child
to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem,
buttonholing the people around them,
pointing, insistently telling anyone who will listen,
and many who will not,
that *this* is the one
– this baby right here.

This is the one she's been waiting for;
this is the one they've *all* been waiting for:
come and see, come and see, come and see!

But how does she know?
How does she know that this is the one?

She knows, perhaps, precisely because she *has*
worshipped in the temple with fasting and prayer
night and day.

She is someone whose mind, whose imagination,
is soaked in the promises of God that are
rehearsed in the temple's worship,
in the prayers, the chants, the rites and ceremonies.
She knows what it means
to look for the redemption of Jerusalem,
because she lives on the words of Israel's prayers –
she feeds on the laments, the cries for God's help,⁵
the remembrances of God's saving acts,

the praise of God's liberative power,
and the promises of God's coming.
She knows what she is looking for.

But she also knows, perhaps, because of where she stands.
She is someone forced to look on from the margins –
from an outer court, from the position of a widow,
from the edges of Israel's life.

She might be less inclined than many –
especially many of those who are allowed through
to the inner court, the court of priests and men –
she might be less inclined than them
to look in the wrong place
for the arrival of God's redemption.

She isn't looking to the comfortable, the respectable,
the powerful, the people of substance and stability.
That's not where she looks for the rising spark
of God's answer to her prayers.

The God she serves is the God of Malachi,
the God who is against those who
oppress the hired workers in their wages,
against those who forget the orphans and – yes – the widows,
against those who thrust aside the refugees and immigrants.

Someone who lives at the margins,
she knows to look around those margins
for the signs of God's work.

And so, unlike most of this crowd,
she *sees*.

She sees this baby, carried by his harassed mother,
accompanied by his struggling father,
in the midst of all this noise,

making their way through a system
that does not pay them much attention,
and she somehow sees the redemption of God arriving.

We are away, now, from the noise, the colour, the crowds,
not just today, when we're sitting in our own homes,
but even when we gather in our church building:
we enjoy peace, and beauty, and reverence.

But the question that Anna poses to us is
whether we are ready to see where God is at work.

We are, after all, people who pray the Lord's prayer
week after week.

We may not remain in the temple day and night,
constantly fasting and praying,
but we do, over and over again,
pray 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done'.

We read the scriptures that tell us
what God's kingdom is like, what God's will requires.

We hear God's promises, again and again.

We pray them, we sing them, we hear them preached.

But even with all that,
are we looking in the right direction to see God at work?
Are we looking in the right direction to see
where the king of glory is coming in?

Because if we want to see God more clearly,
if we want to learn God's ways more deeply,
if we want to understand more richly
what life in God's kingdom might involve,
we will need to look with eyes like Anna's,
attuned to seeing Jesus
living amongst the overlooked and the ignored,
the bypassed and the left behind,
forming with them unexpected life
against all the expectations of
the comfortable and the substantial.

We need to look with eyes like Anna's,
watching to see what is arriving from the margins.

Amen