

Simeon & Anna

St Brandon's

Luke 2:22-40

29 January 2023

The presentation of Christ in the temple. It so happens that I preached on this Sunday last year but, tempting as it was to use the same sermon and see if anyone noticed, this is a very different 'take' on the theme.

Last year, I focused on the first few verses of the self-same Gospel reading, and tried to work out what was going on in the sacrificial system that Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus were caught up in. The rest of the reading, however, which focuses on Simeon and Anna, got hardly a mention.

So today, let's look at these two characters and what we might learn from them. And there's an appropriateness about this for us as a congregation because both of them were clearly very old – Simeon anticipating his death, and Anna aged 84 or possibly more. What can those of us who are (very) old learn from them? And is there anything here for those of you who are young still – not yet 60, let's say?

Well, the obvious first point to make is that they were old *and* faithful, old *and* hopeful. Age, it seems to me from my perspective of being in the third age, can bring disappointment and despondency. All the hopes and plans of youth over and done with; dreams of things to be achieved perhaps not fulfilled; only increasing infirmity and death to look forward to(!). But Simeon and Anna show us a different way: of remaining faithful and hopeful that the promises of God for us and the world will be fulfilled. Simeon was looking forward to the consolation of Israel – that word perhaps reminding us of words from Isaiah (41:1): "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God ... the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together". Anna, similarly, was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem – some kind of release from oppression, whatever form that might take. And it had been revealed to Simeon that he personally wouldn't die before seeing the Lord's Messiah, and he remained faithful to that promise.

Am I, are you, however old you may be, still faithful and hopeful, believing that the promises of God for us and the world will be fulfilled?

Secondly, both Simeon and Anna were prophets. That is, they were able both to speak the truth into their present situation, and to look forward to what the future held. Indeed, they are sometimes understood to be the last in the long line of OT prophets, and in some church traditions they have a feast day, or rather an afterfeast day (after Candlemas on 2nd February), to themselves.

St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says that among the gifts given to the Church would be that some would be prophets (4:11). Age, as we learn from Simeon and Anna, is clearly no barrier to this. Who among us holds that gift of prophecy?

Part of Simeon's prophecy is to do with God's salvation which his eyes had now seen in the form of the infant Jesus. But his understanding of God's salvation, as we've already seen in the bit from Isaiah that I mentioned, is universal: God has prepared His salvation in the presence of *all* peoples; a light for revelation to the Gentiles (non-Jews); as well as the glory of His people Israel (the Jews themselves). No one is excluded from the invitation, everyone is included in this vision of salvation. Anna, however, is more parochial – her focus is on the redemption of Jerusalem.

Do I, do you, however old you may be, similarly look forward to God's salvation (physical, material, spiritual and so on) that is both local and particular to us, and universal for all?

But Simeon's prophecy, after the *Nunc Dimittis* part ("Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace ...") also has some hard words, as prophecies often do. The salvation of God, Christ's coming into the world, will cause the inner thoughts of many to be revealed, and there will be division and opposition as a result – something we see very clearly through Jesus's ministry, passion and death. And Mary will not be exempt from these tensions. A sword will pierce her own soul too – we think of her particularly at the foot of the cross.

Am I, are you, however old you may be, accepting of the fact that the gospel of Christ will face opposition, that we may face opposition and even persecution, *and* are we determined to remain faithful and hopeful through it all?

It is said of Simeon that the Holy Spirit rested on him, that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he wouldn't die before seeing the Messiah, and that it was the Holy Spirit who guided him into the temple and to Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus. Picking out at least Mary and Jesus would, of course, have been very easy because of the halos they had (if the traditional paintings of the scene are to be believed)! But here we are, many years before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, being told of an intimate relationship between a particular person, Simeon, and the Spirit of God.

Am I, are you, however old you may be, someone on whom the Holy Spirit rests? Someone who is open to the guidance of the Spirit both in general and in the very particular? Do I, do you, even want that kind of intimate relationship with the Spirit?

And finally, we should leave the last word to Anna, even though she doesn't get any recorded words of her own(!). It doesn't say anything about the Holy Spirit and Anna, but it's hardly a stretch of the imagination to suggest that she too was a Spirit-filled person. Everything we're told about her, including her being a prophet, would indicate that. But before you consider emulating her and taking up residence in the Church, it's likely that she did actually leave the temple, but was also there so frequently that it may have felt as though she never left. But perhaps we should consider emulating her in other ways. She worshipped, she fasted and prayed night and day, she praised God, and she spoke out about Jesus.

Am I, are you, however old you may be, anything like Anna in these respects? Worship, fasting, prayer, praise, willing and able to speak out about our faith and hope?

So, however old we may be, are we continuing to be faithful and hopeful; who among us holds the gift of prophecy; do we look forward to God's salvation that is both local and particular to us, and universal for all; are we accepting of the fact that the gospel of Christ will face opposition, that we may face opposition and even persecution, *and* are we determined to remain faithful and hopeful through it all; are we people on whom the Holy Spirit rests, open to the guidance of the Spirit both in general and in the very particular; are we at all like Anna in worship, fasting, prayer, praise, willing and able to speak out about our faith and hope in Christ?

However old we may be, these may very well be the work of a lifetime, whatever may be left of it, and a work that will continue until, like Simeon, we are dismissed in peace.

Amen