

Watching and Waiting

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist at Candlemas, 28 January 2024

The readings were: Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-end; Luke. 2:22-40



Today we're remembering the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, that festival we also know as Candlemas, which usually marks the end of the season of Epiphany. We remember how, in accordance with Jewish Law, Mary brought her first-born son to Jerusalem forty days after his birth - for two purposes: the first was the Jewish rite of purification of a new mother (in the Christian tradition, this ritual came to emphasise thanksgiving for the safe delivery of a child); and secondly, for Mary and Joseph as a couple, for a ceremony known as the Redemption of the Firstborn. Exodus 13 tells us that the eldest male child was consecrated to the Lord, and the father would pay a sum of money to the priest in order to release the child from priestly obligations and to receive him back into his family, as required under the Law of Moses. Our beautiful Candlemas liturgy commemorates that act of consecration, as we offer ourselves in the service of the Lord today.

The Presentation is the last of the events in Luke's Gospel that occur during the infancy of Jesus, and it's said to have a "bitter-sweet" quality to it in that the words attributed to Simeon tell of a vision

of *suffering* as well as of *triumph*. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon recognises a very special child who will bring light and salvation to God's faithful people. Jesus will reveal the truth about God and where we all stand in relation to God. Through him, says Simeon, all truth will be revealed; the thoughts that people might wish to conceal will be disclosed; and there will be no hiding place for God's enemies. This will inevitably mean opposition to Jesus and violence against him and will therefore bring much pain to Mary, as well as bringing a great upheaval in the world and the world's values. Jesus suffered and died in his work for the kingdom, to bring us hope in our times of trial and difficulty. Indeed, the Christian life is a difficult way, for it will bring us into conflict with attitudes and beliefs we cannot accept; it could set us apart from the world and many Christians will face persecution. As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:18).

The story of Simeon and Anna meeting the infant Jesus is a story about *patient waiting* finally rewarded, and it's also a story about *vision*. We spend so much of our lives waiting for things to happen, things that we can often visualise clearly but are unable to realise immediately. Young people wait impatiently to grow up; to begin careers or to get married and start families; as adults, they wait for their labours to bear fruit, or for recognition in their chosen work or in another activity that means a great deal to them. There are times when we all wait for promises to be





fulfilled; and as people of faith, we look for *signs* of God's presence and purpose in our lives. And we're encouraged in our waiting when we have a clear vision of *what could be and must surely be*. The Jewish people had long been waiting for a Messiah who would lead the people to freedom from oppression. Simeon had been watching and waiting for the coming of the deliverer all his life. And one day the Holy Spirit led him to the Temple and there he saw Jesus with his family, and this was the fulfilment of many years of waiting, and not just a vague hope that one day something might happen, but a real certainty and expectation. And then, when eventually he saw Jesus, he knew that the coming kingdom could only be born in struggle, and that this tiny child, so innocent and vulnerable, would pay for it with his life.

And there's another witness, Anna, who has spent most of her life waiting in certainty for the coming of the Messiah, because God has promised that he *will* come. Anna's life has been hard, yet lived out in faith; we're told she was married for only seven years before she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four – yet always in expectation of good things from God. Luke shows us through both Simeon and Anna that, if we hold on to our faith even when nothing seems to be happening for us, it *will* be rewarded in God's good time, and that the Holy Spirit of God will be revealed *in* us and *through* us, his faithful people.

There's something difficult about waiting for many of us. You may think that waiting is a waste of time, especially if you can't do much else but wait, and some people will give up and go their own way. We dislike waiting, because it can seem to

be a state of being at the mercy of others, and most people would prefer to be *active* rather than passive, taking the initiative, formulating the plans. We live in a world where activity of all kinds is hugely important; no-one wants to be inactive, as this might imply dependency on others; no-one wants to have to give up doing things because of old age or infirmity. But there must be times for all of us when we can only wait passively and patiently, when helping ourselves seems beyond our capability.

Simeon and Anna are only two of many people in the Bible who waited for a very long time for God to answer their prayers. Jesus himself experienced a difficult time of waiting when even he could do nothing to influence what was going on around him. We see him in the Garden of Gethsemane, waiting fearfully for the inevitable outcome. This change in Jesus is noticeable especially in Mark's Gospel, which begins by showing him dashing around from one activity to another: casting out evil spirits, healing the sick, travelling around the country and always directing the action – until that point in the story where he's handed over to his enemies by Judas Iscariot, and this action of Judas marks the movement from Jesus' time of action into his time of 'passion', that time of *inactivity*, of being held passively at the mercy of others, caught in a state of waiting for his fate to be worked out by others. Hebrews 2:17-8 tells us that Jesus "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect," and so he too was tested: "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." We look to Jesus as our role model in every aspect of our lives.





And this is especially true in the way he was *tested*. Although we know he suffered great physical pain, the word ‘suffering’ doesn’t just mean feeling pain but also being trapped in a state of being passive, of having to *wait* for things to happen rather than being active and in control.

We’re all called to times of waiting for God to answer our prayers, times when our faith is sorely tested. The story of Simeon and Anna tells us that we should never give up hoping for the Lord’s appearing. Sometimes we have to wait a very long time but, if we wait in faith, our faith *will* eventually be rewarded. The Bible speaks in many places of the importance of *persevering*, of never giving up in our spiritual struggles. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul tells us to be persistent in proclaiming the gospel, “whether the time is favourable or unfavourable” (v.2). And in Luke 18, Jesus tells us we are to pray *constantly* and be like the poor widow who continually harassed an unjust judge until she won justice for herself. We are never to stop asking God for the things we need. Perseverance is a sign of a long-term commitment, the sign of a faith that will not be discouraged however distant God seems to be at times. Simeon and Anna were people of great faith, and faith, in the words of Hebrews 11:1, is “*assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.”

If the things we pray for really are the things God wants for us, then we can be assured that our prayers will be answered in God’s good time. We may not get everything we desire, but we’ll get what *in the sight of God* is right for us.

May the things you hope for be the things God desires for you, and may God sustain you with wonderful visions of things to

Our picture of someone watching and waiting is by Ümit Bulut, made available on the Unsplash platform.