

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2: 21 - 40)

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Rembrandt is amongst those who have painted "The Presentation in the Temple" and he depicts Simeon seated, holding Jesus on his left arm and talking to Joseph and Mary who kneel before him. Above this group stands Anna, with arms outstretched in awe and wonder.

Whose "day" is this? In the Book of Common Prayer it is described as "The Purification of Mary". In other traditions Simeon takes centre stage. In our calendar it is described as "The Presentation of Christ in the Temple". In Eastern Orthodox tradition it is called with wonderful ambiguity "The Meeting".

The reading and the account are peculiar to Luke who runs together the account of the ritual of purification after child-birth and the presentation of the first born son. The event takes place in the Temple, the centre of devotion to God; the place where people brought their offerings in liturgies which reminded them that what we have comes from God. The picture of two humble parents with their child is enhanced by the presence of two people who typify devout, Jewish, ordinary people. It has been written of Simeon and Anna that "their lives passed in conscientious loitering in an environment of holiness"

They were all too aware that life was not good for the people of Israel. However they had not become political activists, but rather given themselves to a life of prayer and of waiting. And because these two people wait, they see what others do not see.

Simeon has two speeches attributed to him: the first a hymn of praise, the other solemn words that accompany a blessing. The first is a reflection from a devoted man of piety, quoting or alluding to Isaiah 49, and he speaks of the mission and calling of the child whom he holds. The second speaks of the harsh nature of the future and of how that mission and calling is to be lived out. Through Simeon, Mary hears of the good news that her child will bear, and also for the first time encounters its challenge and tragedy and hears of his rejection by many in Israel.

But let us this morning focus on Anna, and two aspects of her life and character which might encourage and challenge us.

Firstly, Anna had lived a life of prayer. Let's try and do the maths when we consider her life. Maybe we could assume that she married as late as 20 (very late for a young Jewish girl!). We read that she was then married for seven years before tragedy struck and she was widowed. She then had at least 57 years as a widow – one of the potentially vulnerable and marginalised in Jewish society.

Some might say that "all she could do was pray" – a kind of inconspicuous old woman whose presence was taken for granted and had nothing offer to life. "All I can do is pray now" is a cry that I often heard in pastoral ministry from some elderly people, as if their real work in the life of the church was past and they now had to settle for a role in the church's "B-team". This is far from the truth. The service of prayer is one of the vital ministries of the church and often undertaken by the elderly. In many churches it is precisely the older women (and it is often but not exclusively the women) who are dedicated and faithful in prayer. All too often it is this group of people who carry the rest of us by their prayerful ministry.

We kid ourselves if we believe that one day when we have more time we will become good faithful people of prayer too. Do we suddenly become good at praying when we retire or when the children leave home? I think that Anna's service and dedication was

built on a lifetime of serving God in this way. Anna's life of prayer is an encouragement and challenge to all of us, of whatever age, to develop the practice and habits of prayerfulness at any point in our lives.

Secondly, Anna lived a life that was ever open to change. At the age of 84 her life was open to God teaching her something wonderfully new. Here in this baby, in the Temple as she stood, was the fulfilment of all that she had been looking forward to. It might have been easy for her to say that she was too old or that it was too late for anything as radical as this. In fact, quite the opposite. It is Anna who still carries the ministry of prophecy at a time when prophecy had long been out of fashion in Jerusalem. Anna keeps alive the idea that God has a living word for the present day. Anna has no intention of missing out on what God has in store.

I have to say from my experience of parish ministry that it is often not the elderly who are resistant to change – they may well have been at the forefront of praying for it. The people to watch out for are those aged about 50 to 65 – and I speak as one who is themselves firmly within this age bracket. We are often the people who have been at the forefront of change in the past and now have church life much as we wanted it to be. We are comfortable with that and not keen on a younger generation coming along and altering it! Maybe, just maybe, we will miss out on what God has in store for his church in this day rather than the day of 10 to 15 years ago.

Anna was not someone to fall prey to every passing whim or craze to hit the church. But her deep sense of waiting and her prayerfulness combined with her openness to God led to her seeing the first stirrings of a deep work of God amongst his people. Anna passes in and out of the New Testament records in just three verses, and yet she leaves us a legacy and a challenge to the ordering of our lives as we seek to discern the purposes of God for today.