

Christmas 1 December 31, 2023 Luke 2:22-40

The shepherds and angels have returned to wherever it is that shepherds and angels live. Mary and Joseph and the newborn baby are returning to life at home. Normally it is a bit of quiet Sunday on this first Sunday in the Christmas season in the church.

It is still too early for us to pack away the Christmas scene though. Not like the time I was in Myers near closing time on Christmas Eve and literally as we were being ushered out the door on Christmas Eve the staff were pulling everything down to set up for the Boxing Day sales. We are not like that in the church. We have to stay with it to ponder all that has occurred. With Mary, now is a good time to consider, "what it all may mean". There is still much to feed on in the Christmas story.

And in fact the Christmas story is still not complete! In the story as Luke tells it we are only weeks after the birth and the gospel writer is still introducing new characters. He has got quite a fascinating cast of characters hasn't he? Interestingly for a story of the saviour of the world, the Messiah, the fulfilment of Israel's (and hence the world's) hopes - none of them are what we would describe as part of the religious establishment. Yet Luke so clearly does want to place Jesus smack bang in the religious tradition of his people. Maybe he is making the point that this story bypasses the religious heavies of the day because God seems to delight in choosing that which is small, of no account and easily overlooked. Seems God almost takes a perverse delight in avoiding the heavy rigidity of the professionally religious and feels far more comfortable in the unpretentious company of the ordinary people.

This time it is not a young peasant girl, nor shepherds, but a couple of elderly people who hang around the temple all day who now join the story. Simeon and Anna. I suspect they probably were considered a bit strange in their day and in the story unfolding we are to see them as extraordinary people - not in their social status or accomplishments but in their faithfulness. And they present a fascinating juxtaposition of old and new. The old prophets Simeon and Anna and the 40 day old child Jesus. In my imagination I can see the old crinkled face of Simeon and the toothless grin of Anna and the look of wonder as they gaze upon the fresh faced young mother with the new baby.

Simeon and Anna can recognise the new thing that God is doing because they were steeped in the scriptures and the tradition and the Spirit. It kept them looking forward, waiting, straining. How inspiring to see people grow old and even as less and less of their lives lie before them, as more and more of their friends are no longer with them, to still be interested and open to the wonderful things God is doing.

We don't really like the elderly too much in our society. When our age bows down to worship we are nearly always honouring youth, beauty and success - the Holy Trinity of our culture. The elderly well.... Let's put it this way - when was the last time you saw an old person in a commercial.

The dishonouring of the elderly was brought home to me once when I was visiting a woman to prepare the funeral for her 92 year old husband who died just before Christmas that year. She lived in a flat in East Melbourne, opposite Fitzroy Gardens.

Very expensive real estate in that area, but she probably moved in before it really took off. I was shocked and outraged to learn that within 10 days of his death she had had two enquiries to buy her flat. As she said, "But I don't understand why I would sell it; it's my home". I asked someone how do they know her husband died? They watch the death and funeral notices in the paper! And I have to freely confess at this point that I have more than once described a congregation, or indeed the Uniting Church as a denomination, as "mainly elderly people" as if that in itself was a dreaded contagious terminal disease. Issue not that the elderly are present in the congregation. Issue we do not have more younger people.

But these two have seen something that very few others had the capacity to see. After all the years of waiting they feel they can now move on and lay down the burden they carry. Waiting for the Messiah is a demanding vocation. It takes patience, persistence, faithfulness. And what a relief when that day you have begun to despair of ever seeing finally arrives. What joy to be able to declare I can now lay down my burden! I have seen all I need to see.

I have seen this many times. A person waiting for something before they die and something tells them, in the words from Galatians, "the fullness of time" has come. Somehow you know this is the right time. So much of life is about timing. My own father did it. He had been sick in hospital for two weeks and when we realised he was not going to make it we summoned my brother from Spain. We told Dad he was on his way. And after travelling for 36 hours Max arrived at the hospital and Dad died two hours later.

Say you knew you had just a short time to live. What might your final acts might reveal about yourself? Would you choose a gesture of generosity? Of settling old scores? Of erasing guilt? Of forgiveness? Of acceptance?

Simeon and Anna - they haven't seen anything extraordinary really though have they? No miracles, so far as we know no angels, no signs or wonders that we know of- just another baby coming for the presentation. But they had seen and held the future.

In the new thing God is doing they see the continuity amongst the discontinuity. Something new is breaking in, but it belongs as part of the ancient.

Luke is at considerable pains to point out that Mary, Joseph and Jesus are fastidious about observing all the law requires. That they keep the obligations of Torah, the point being of course is that when Jesus is attacked later and accused of being a law breaker it is clear that no he is not just an iconoclast not just someone who goes around knocking things down. He does not come to attack and destroy law. On the contrary he is the fulfilment and all his life has been lived in devotion to law. He is no outsider. Any challenging and uprooting he does is from his desire to see the law lived and results from him applying the insights gained from living a life sitting under law. He was born, lived and died an observant Jew.

Simeon and Anna speak words of fulfilment but also words of dislocation and upheaval. They repeat themes of Mary's own song upon hearing the words of the angel Gabriel. Upheaval, struggle, casting down. This child is not just a cute little baby who will grow to be a kind man. They do not execute people just for being kind. Simeon tells Mary, Some will oppose him and Mary you will feel like a sword has pierced your heart.

That's a tough call to make, you try telling that to a mother who brings her first baby for baptism.

The old year is about to be laid down and we look forward to taking a new one up. Virtually everyone is looking forward eagerly to the new.

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace

According to your word;

For my own eyes have seen your salvation

Which you have prepared in the presence of all people,

A light of revelation to the Gentiles

And glory for the people of Israel.