

Psalm 84; Luke 2: 22-40

May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory.

This morning we are celebrating Candlemas – when Jesus – just 40 days old was taken to the Temple – for Mary’s purification and the ceremony of the consecration and redemption of the first born. We could ask - was such a ceremony necessary for Jesus who would become the redeemer and saviour of all? It’s interesting that we don’t read anything about the actual ceremony in the Temple; Mary and Joseph were doing what the Jewish law required of them. However we do read of God speaking through 2 encounters – not chance encounters but divine appointments - with a couple of geriatrics – possibly not what we would have expected!

But what an impact those encounters would have had on these young parents, coping with a new born, maybe lacking sleep, still away from their home town and relatives and, from the selection of the offering they brought to the Temple, they had little to offer and could have been struggling financially. Could they have been doubting what God was doing in all of this – and who really was their son? It had all been a bit of a whirlwind.

First they meet Simeon, an elderly man who comes up to them and takes Jesus into his arms. Who was he? Would he drop their baby? But his words brought confirmation and enlargement of their understanding of just who Jesus was and his mission. It was far broader than for the Jews alone (with their exclusive Temple); Jesus was ‘God’s salvation, for all nations; a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel.’ Wow! But that didn’t mean everything would be straightforward; Simeon warned Mary of the turbulence that lay ahead – Jesus would cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, a sign that would be rejected and Mary’s own soul would be pierced.

After that encounter they meet Anna! throughout Luke’s gospel you find couplets of stories involving both men and women. This was revolutionary! It spoke volumes at that time and still does now - as it confirms that women too were valued and have a role in God’s salvation.

I’d like to briefly focus on thoughts on Anna. As I’ve thought about her during this week, I’ve been struck by her amazing life of commitment, sacrifice and prayer and although there’s just 3 verses which mention her - there’s plenty here to challenge and encourage us.

I can’t get over the fact that there was a woman who actually lived in the Temple – that place of male domination! The first Temple - Solomon’s Temple - never had any gender segregation but this was Herod’s Temple, where the women were restricted to the outer courts, possibly just a raised gallery along three sides of the court. They were permitted to **observe** the ceremonies but were not allowed to **participate** in them. Also under Herod the Great there was much cruelty and corruption was rife among the priesthood.

Anna was widowed young and in a society where woman had little status, particularly singles, that must have been doubly hard. She could have easily become bitter and resentful of God. No doubt many of her friends, peers and relatives tried to persuade her to re-marry and have her own family – but instead she chose to dwell in God’s Temple. I wonder what made her turn her back on a comfortable, conventional life to choose instead to dedicate herself to a life of prayer and fasting in the Temple? Surely it’s no life for a woman!! She wouldn’t be welcome there! She’ll be despised and misunderstood!

But Anna must have had such determination and a really strong desire to seek after God that nothing was going to stop her and – either 84 years later – or when she was 84 (as this can be translated either way) – she was still there in the Temple – decades later. What perseverance! Not a comfortable place for an old woman!

So what drew her to the Temple? Despite all the corruption and the money changers and market stalls it was the place where God's presence was thought to be. It was a magnificent building – built for the splendour of God. It was where prayer and sacrifice took place – continually. It was awesome. Maybe at night, after the crowds had left, through the darkness you could see the incense was burning on the altar – and rather than it being a place of fear – it was where God's presence could truly be felt.

Night and day she worshipped. I wonder if she loved to repeat the words of Psalm 84?

How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Even the sparrow **and a woman** has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar,

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

Anna fasted and prayed. I wonder if the fasting was by choice – or the result of being a widow with no one to support her – that is apart from God himself. But over the years that meagre diet maintained her. I wonder what she prayed? the psalms? Prayers of confession for God's people who were ignoring Him? Prayers of longing that God's redemption of Israel would take place and that the Messiah would be revealed? Prayers of blessing on the young families coming with their little ones – just like Mary and Joseph?

I wonder if Anna was a prophetess – when she first entered the Temple – or was that the result of hearing God's word, being close to God and speaking out what she heard – with wisdom and insight - that she became known as such? It was amazing that she got that recognition when women weren't accepted as credible witnesses!

And how did she encounter Jesus? Did she overhear what Simeon said – or was she like Simeon – prompted by the Holy Spirit to come up to them at that very moment – and then she overflowed with thankfulness to God. She didn't just see a baby – she saw God's redemption being fulfilled – those prayers, pleas, longings being answered.

And knowing this, she couldn't keep this amazing news to herself! She definitely wasn't reclusive but she shared it with all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Here's some suggestions of what we can take from Anna's life -

Firstly - if you want to be close to God then being in a Temple or church building is a good place to begin! That doesn't mean that God can't be found elsewhere – or we can restrict and contain God to a single building. I thoroughly enjoyed God's presence sitting on Thurston beach on Friday morning!! But a building where God is praised, worshipped, magnified can have a special significance.

Secondly, Anna followed a strict life of self-discipline. Is that essential to be close to God? I don't think we have to follow rituals and disciplines to get to know God better – because God is all loving, merciful and gracious and doesn't demand that we do things for set rewards. It's very easy to do rituals religiously without having any love or passion for God or one another. But if we demonstrate our heart's desire is to get to know God more, possibly through spending time in His house, praying, even making sacrifices – this can help us open up to what God is saying and as we live it out our faith grows.

With Lent fast approaching – is it worth considering what you can do to show your desire and openness to God and enjoy having the encouragement of others during this time?

And finally – how important is a building? Didn't Jesus replace the Temple? Not long after Jesus' ascension the Temple was destroyed. It has never been rebuilt. The apostle Paul described God's people as being God's temple with God's Spirit living among them. So do we actually need a building? I'll let Mike address that one – and the practicalities of it!

But I'll end with the quote from Duncan Cambell - "The Kingdom of God is not going to be advanced by our churches becoming filled with people, but by people in our churches becoming filled with God."

Father God may our priority and focus always be on You rather than just the framework which helps us to worship Him. May we live in such a way that your light might be brought to all around us. Amen

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