

What's in a name?

Presentation of Christ 2024

Malachi 3:1-5

Hebrews 2:14-end

Luke 2:22-40

Simeon and Anna keep appearing to me. I keep meeting them. I am constantly encountering extraordinary patience, tenacious faith, persistent prayerfulness when everything is going to pot, astonishing dignity and courage in grief. They're not always religious people, though when they're not I can't help still seeing their faithfulness, hopefulness and courage as of the same human substance as these two lovers of God and temple. I meet them in so many homes, funerals, chance street encounters, hospitals, and here in you.

Simeon and Anna are among the most poignant portraits in human faithfulness that the Bible has to offer. The name Simeon means "God has heard." It is striking how patience is demanded from such a figure as him. We can hear the relief and tiredness in his voice. He might have been asking 'If God has heard my longing for the "consolation of Israel," why am I waiting so long?' If Simeon today nudges us to pray that God will show us what "Consolation" might mean for the State of Israel today, and that God will show the world what a blessing Israel could be for all nations, after such prayers Simeon encourages us to end: "God, have you heard?"

The name Anna means "Gift." The description of her life, dominated by loss, shaped by bereavement, may not seem to be much of a gift. Strikingly, Anna *makes* it a gift by defying loss and grief with determined thanksgiving and keeps her head lifted to see the world in its danger and reality, so at 84 she still continues to maintain a forward-looking political vision, praying for her whole city. She might prompt us to pray for any we know overshadowed by loss, bereavement or disappointment of any kind, that their spirits to be lifted; for them to find the company they need, as she did in the temple, to help them look outwards and forwards. I give thanks for so many who show grace and courage in bereavement turning the unwanted into a kind of gift.

The name Malachi means "my messenger". The word message in Hebrew is also means burden. The messenger is carrying not just a few light words, but a weighty load. As ever, the Bible is candid about how what is good can often feel like a hardship in this world. Our religious shorthand has become problematic because of past abuse of power, but the biblical word "sin" captures all the confusion we generate, leading to reversals and contradictions until we can no longer see the wood for the trees. Good desires become distorted and dangerous; judgements become confused and we start mistaking evil for good; we reach for perverse solutions which turn out to make things worse. Wisdom is a divine gift which helps us unravel and understand what has become over complicated and contradictory.

From the grandeur of the Jerusalem Temple, where this little family honoured God for their first born, Mary and Joseph returned to the nondescript northern town of Nazareth. It was there that Jesus' strength and wisdom grew, preparing him for ministry. The point is, you don't really need wisdom in heaven. You need it when you're navigating this mess. Jesus needed the experience and to prove to us his understanding of humanity.

Like their Temple, we might give thanks for our Cathedral in the heart of the city, a point of light, a sign of our unity and a place where high standards in worship help us all raise our game. At the same time, like the little Nazareth Synagogue, we remember our local parish churches in every different neighbourhood, expressing that shared faith in more locally nuanced ways. That we

learn like Mary and Joseph to cherish both the grandeur and the ordinariness, the big picture and the local detail is a very good prayer.

We hear with Malachi and Simeon how Jesus' presence will expose truth, which many will find difficult. Malachi describes the fierce purifying effect of his presence, cleansing the Temple of malpractice. The consequence is summed up in the exposure of "sorcerers" (Oh is that a bit embarrassing to our ears?) The adulterers (Oh, does that make us wince a bit, as we want to shed the church's intrusion on sex?), the liars (Well, all right then) and against those who abuse the low paid, and the orphan and the foreigner among you. (Ah, that's close to the bone.) If the first two make us recoil, the important thing is to see our ordinary contemporary practice of paying too little and taking advantage of the low paid, and prejudice against foreigner in our land is his climactic punch line after those first two apparently extravagant examples. Let's look more closely: the sorcerers want a power that's not their own; the adulterer wants a partner not their own; the liar wants a truth not their own; finally the economic abuser wants time and energy not their own. The xenophobe is afraid someone foreign will take something off them. All are afraid of scarcity; of death; of missing out. They (we) cannot see the wood for the trees. This is the perspective Malachi sees his people need. This, patient Simeon asserts, is the perspective the Anointed One brings. If we look back and see in Jesus that indeed that is what we got, we can longingly ask, God, you *have* heard, but why are *we* still not getting it?

Along with Anna and Simeon, there's another shimmering portrait of human faithfulness in that scene: Mary and Joseph, proudly bringing their first born to offer him back to God. Everyone was required to do that as a reminder that we do not own our children, they're not trophies or fashion statements or vessels in which to pour our disappointments, but cherished gifts to bring awe and gestate hope and point tired adults forwards. But reading Luke we're particularly amused by the irony: for we know from the annunciation this is God's own offspring; God's self come among us; they really are giving God back to God's self. Luke underlines, then, that God is with us and that *all* that is needed for us to reconciled to God is already available to us.

The name Jeshua means "God saves," God makes safe. I reflected this week with a school visit how the word holy – sanctus – gives us the word sanctuary, a holy place, a special place. I tell them how in a particularly enlightened move, the medieval church used its power generously. For centuries a debtor or fugitive from justice could claim sanctuary in the sanctuary of the church, find safety, immunity from arrest. This stood until 18th January 1989 the police raided a church in Manchester and arrested Sri Lankan asylum seeker Viraj Mendis who had been protected there for two and a half years. He went on to find safety in Germany and become chair of the International Human Rights Association. The police were never, to my knowledge, taken to task for breaking this ancient law. The children who heard this story this week were puzzled that the police did not get into trouble. Well, I thought, it was 1989. In that story, though, we feel in our gut how beautiful it is that the word "holy" in that context also means "safety." Our sense that God's judgement is dangerous for us is really tenacious. We assume God wants to take stuff off us. But the medieval church, for all its power, was onto something really wonderful about God and about what God regards his/her judgement as being for. The purification, the exposure of motives, the revealing of truth can at first feel painful, but its aim in God is always to reach safety. To be OK with God. To be our self with Them.

Remember, Nazareth was the place where Jesus' character and spirituality were nurtured and his working life was secretly spent for thirty years before his well documented ministry. Think of any neighbourhoods you think of as unpromising or dull. Pray for the nurture of vocations there and the flourishing of wisdom and strength of character. For it was in little Nazareth that Jesus' wisdom and strength grew. We may long to know more about that time, but we know just enough and not too much. For its anonymity allows it to remain symbolic of every neighbourhood, every ordinary place. It was Jesus anonymous time there for thirty years that proves to this day that he might be the One who "became like [us] his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God..." tested as we are in suffering, so proving he takes our real, gritty life to the heart of God, not some unattainable fantasy holy life, and so we can trust him to prepare even for ordinary us a safe place in heaven. (Hebrews)

As we reflected last week, the CofE offers ministry and a place of sanctuary in every neighbourhood from Solihull to Sparkhill, from Hockley to Hockley Heath, from Kings Heath to Small Heath. We look forward to welcoming Michael our new Bishop whose seat is the Cathedral, as he comes to help us work for the church's continued provision of ministry and places of prayer in every kind of neighbourhood. We must work so that provision is even-handed, as patient as Simeon and as hopeful as Anna. He will help us to hold on, and we must help him to hold on, to nourish the hope; to be candid about hardship; to be defiantly thankful; and when the message feels like a burden, hold on.

Anna and Simeon and Malachi, Mary and Joseph? That's you.