

Hogmanay

Christmas is not just for children

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3; Luke 2:22-40

I was out shopping in Morningside a few days ago and bumped into some excited children who were either at the school Christmas service or came to the all-age Christmas Eve service.

"Hello, we did what you asked us to do?" I was slightly bemused. The children's smiling mother confirmed, "Yes, they did exactly what you asked them to do?"

"We waited. We waited right up to 8am on Christmas Day morning and then we ran through to open all our presents!"

How long did *you* wait?

If only the influence of Ministers ran in every direction and for all ages. Volunteer for things before your asked. Increase your giving before the pending stewardship campaign. Take up that last day left for the flower rota. The car rota. The coffee rota. We're all about the rotation in Morningside, and there's a place just waiting for you!

Patience is a virtue, the old saying goes. In an often overlooked part of what is still the Christmas story, Joseph and Mary are well within the first month of Jesus' life. They've journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and now on to Jerusalem, during that time of emotional and physical exhaustion after the birth. They come to the Temple, that Mary may be purified, according to the Jewish ritual, and Jesus may be dedicated to God.

In modern times when a child is born there is an expectation that gifts will be given to the family. In Jesus' time as well as gifts received, a couple were expected to make a sacrifice, a gift of great cost to them, to God. In our modern world of benign expectation or greedy assumption there is

something to be said about a practice that gives to God something that is valuable because of your sense of thanksgiving. We may be blessed in the gift, but we are as blessed, if not more so, in the giving.

In the sacred space of the Jerusalem Temple, a man and a woman step forward to aid (us) in making sense of the remarkable events that are unfolding into the narrative of Jesus' early childhood.

Two old people had been waiting for the promise of God. Far beyond what any child waits for on Christmas Eve, Simeon and Anna had been waiting all their lives. When the prophet Isaiah had written some three or four hundred years before the time of Jesus, he had looked both back in time and forward in time. Back to when God had set the children of Israel free from slavery in Egypt, a promise God would keep again for those in captivity in Babylon; and forward to a time when God's saving power and God's hope would be needed again, coming into the world in the form of an infant. Images of weddings and the earth and gardens bringing forth fruit and new life abound. God's word would be kept, God's children would be set free, not just once but again and again in the process of salvation.

For a every fall, a lifting up; for every wound, a time of healing; for every darkness of war, a time of peace; for every hunger and thirst, a generous meeting of every need; for ever sense of loss, the gift of fulfilment; for every despair, however deep, the gift of hope even after the longest of waiting.

How long did those children who came to our Church before Christmas Eve wait? A few hours which would have seemed like an eternity to them as the hands of the clock stood still. How long had that old couple in Jerusalem been waiting? Year after long year; decade after decade. Not for

Christmas in the way we might understand it, but for the fulfilment of the promise of God, found at Christmas, in the gift of a Saviour, Who would bring freedom and hope for *all* God's children. Christmas is not just for children. It is for people of every age, young and old alike. I wish that our nativity plays would include this old couple, the ones who had waited faithfully and patiently for years, and saw God's promises kept in Jesus.

We know little about Simeon. An old Jewish man of faith who had waited a lifetime in the Temple precincts to catch a glimpse of God's Chosen One. Simeon was one of the pious minority of his day who refused the route of violence against the Romans, or the religious manipulation of the High Priests. He waited, and waited, until that day when a dusty little family arrived, and Simeon saw what he had been waiting for. "Can I see Him? Will you permit me to hold Him?" And the couple let Simeon cradle the Light of the World in his old arms. Precious and wonderful and soul-warming. We live in a different age, less trusting. Would you have entrusted your first born into the arms of a stranger? What does your response say about you? What does it say about Joseph and Mary? Just an observation.

And what of Anna, another ancient habitu  of the Temple. From a religious family. A widow for 84 years, Anna's commitment to worship, prayer and fasting made the Temple the centre of her life. Bet your life she would have been on our coffee rota and the flower rota, and helping out wherever she was able. I hope she also got to hold the baby, though the Bible passage doesn't say. For she too, like Simeon, prompted by God's Spirit, saw and felt something in this gift of a child, this Jesus, Saviour of the World; this Immanuel, God with us.

Note how we read about women and men in the Jesus story. Previously we can read about Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist's parents; then Mary and Joseph of course; and now

Simeon and Anna. Women and men then, and now, play their part in announcing the incredible story of God's involvement with humanity, the hope and freedom God continues to offer.

It takes the wisdom, persistence, and faithfulness of an old man and an old woman to see what lies at the heart of Jesus, the heart of what we believe about what we call Christmas. It is about hopefulness and it is about freedom. Simeon and Anna have waited all their lives for this Child. Now they can die in peace, and Simeon, in a song that is known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, sings about it:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Rather than glancing away from death, as we do, anxiously, dying in considerable consternation, these two old saints have waited patiently and will rest in peace. We do not like to wait, to rush on, to be uneasy about the long empty days in our diaries and computers. Would we stay still wait long enough to see what Simeon and Anna have seen, after the rush of the run-up to Christmas? Have we stayed still enough in these quieter days between Christmas and New Year, and if we have, have we been looking, and praying, and wondering as we waited?

What did those two old saints see? In Jesus, the gift of Christmas, these two who carried the vast hope of their faith, waited for the day. They saw God's promises come true. For them, and importantly, for the whole world. Hope for all peoples. Jew and Gentile, young and old, male and female, saint and sinner. And peace. Beyond belief, but the remaining hope.

I think that's why children see through Christmas, and feel, in a way busy adults don't always get, the intense wonder of this time. They're open to it. They're open to God and the gift of Jesus, hope of eternity. It's not a struggle for them. At the other end of the age scale, I often find older

people, relaxing into whatever days they have left, seeing through Christmas too and despite everything, being often open to the wonder, the peace, and the hope, even at the end.

Not an easy hope; not a painless hope; not a shallow hope; but a hope resilient enough to get a child through life, and tender enough to get an older person through the time of dying. An honest hope, that Simeon and Anna knew, which would face darkness as well as bring light.

Christmas is not just for children, it is for everyone, because it moves steadily through wonder and horror, through bliss and terror, through fear and towards hope. From a barely sheltered birth in Bethlehem; through the murderous plans of a paranoid King Herod; through flight as refugees to a land not home. And back again, to teaching and sharing and blessing and forgiveness and a love that holds on, through and beyond the cross at Calvary. The falling, and the rising, of Jesus, sung about by an old man cradling the Saviour in his arms; and Whose birth of redemption was chattered about by an old lady in the holy place. Christmas good news for young and old alike. Give thanks, and see if you can see the hope!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen