

Luke 2.22-40

My eyes have seen

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 30 January 2022

Light and Glory [5]

The long wait

Today we reach the end of our short series on the first two chapters of Luke.

For over 400 years there had been no new prophet, no word from God since these words through Malachi:

‘See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.’

Malachi 4.5-6 (NIV)

If I'm honest, that's quite the cliff-hanger – I bet you didn't know they were invented by God through an Old Testament prophet!

Those words – and then silence. For four *hundred* years.

What's the longest you've ever waited for something? Maybe you still are? I'm so bad at waiting that I get annoyed if a traffic light takes more than a minute to turn green!

Four hundred years of waiting – and then suddenly there is an explosion of activity: angels, miracles, babies, songs of praise, words of prophecy. Last week we made it to the end of chapter 1 and the birth of John – now we skip forward a few months, past Quirinius, the census, the angels, the shepherds, the swaddling cloths, and Mary treasuring all these things in her heart.

Piety not poverty

We begin with **Joseph and Mary** travelling from Bethlehem to Jerusalem with their new-born baby (22). There they performed two separate ceremonies.

First, the consecration of the **firstborn male** (23). As part of the original Passover, every firstborn male had to be redeemed for the price of five shekels (about 58g of silver, worth £30 in today's money), as a reminder of the way God rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13.2, 12-15).

The second ceremony was the **purification** of the mother (22). After giving birth, mothers had to wait 40 days and then offer a sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon as a sign of being ceremonially clean again (Leviticus 12.1-5). And, if she couldn't afford a lamb, the mother could offer two pigeons instead (Leviticus 12.8).

I have heard many preachers make much of the fact that Mary and Joseph offered the poor person's sacrifice of two pigeons (24). The thing is, a) *everyone* was poor in the first century except a very few people at the top; b) as a carpenter Joseph probably had a decent income; c) Luke makes nothing of their poverty, but he makes a lot of something else – so let's focus on that instead.

Luke says:

(22-23) When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord...

(27) When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required...

(39) When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord...

Luke 2 (NIV)

Luke doesn't care about their poverty, but he cares a lot about their piety. They took pains to do things properly, to follow God and his requirements carefully. They didn't need to do all this – after all, who would know if they hadn't? Nazareth was miles away from Jerusalem – no-one would ever know if they cut the corner and didn't bother with these ceremonies.

I think it is significant that God chose an everyday, committed, devout, pious family to raise his Son – a family who sought to do things God's way. Is it any wonder that Jesus **grew and became strong, filled with wisdom** and the **grace of God** (40)?

But Luke's concern to highlight piety doesn't stop there.

Simeon was **righteous and devout** (25). God had promised **he would not die before he had seen the Messiah** (26) – we don't know how long he had waited, but the implication is that it was a long time. We have a man who lived a godly life, who listened to God, who trusted God.

Then we have Anna. She was **very old** Luke says (36) – at least **84 years** old. If you think that doesn't sound **very old**, you're welcome to take it up with Luke when you get to heaven! She had been a widow for many decades, and **never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying** (37). She never missed a service, she was at every prayer meeting – and she fasted as well: her private faith matched her public behaviour.

Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna – these are Good People. They were Ordinary People whose hearts and lives were focused on God, on following God, on living God's way. It's therefore no surprise that, unlike the religious leaders later in Jesus' life, they recognised God at work in Jesus.

Rich or poor – it doesn't matter. What mattered was their godly piety, their humble obedience, their simple faithfulness.

I commend their example to you.

Partnership with the Spirit

When I was at school my family were Guide Dog Puppy Walkers. Every 12-18 months we would get a new puppy, to distract us from having to give the old one back.

They were a mix of dogs – some black, some golden, some male, some female, some small, some big – some *very* big.

Sometimes when they were little, if they got tired on a walk, they would simply sit or lie down and refuse to carry on. Usually I could cajole them into getting up, but once or twice I actually had to pick them up and carry them for a bit.

When they get bigger and stronger you have the opposite problem. There were one or two that were so big and so strong, they could literally pull Mum off her feet. Even I struggled not to be dragged around by them.

Whether its lying down and refusing to move, or wrenching someone's arm out of the socket – neither of those is much good for a Guide Dog.

The puppy has to learn how to work with the human at the other end of the lead. They have to learn how to walk at their owner's pace, and not do whatever or go wherever they want.

Being a disciple is a bit like that: it is a partnership between the work of the Holy Spirit, and our own efforts. We need to learn how to listen to God, to follow where he leads, to walk alongside him and not head off wherever and whenever we feel like it.

We've already seen how Simeon was a model of piety and godly behaviour – but there's something else Luke says about him that is every bit as important.

(25) There was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon... the Holy Spirit was on him.

(26) It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit...

(27) Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts...

Luke 2 (NIV)

This man had a special gift of the Spirit – it is highly unusual for someone to be described like this in the Bible – at least, it was unusual before Pentecost.

Luke describes a partnership between Simeon and the Spirit. The Spirit was **on him**; he was **righteous and devout** (25). The Spirit **revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah**; he believed it (26). The Spirit **moved** him to go to the temple at exactly the right time; he obeyed, and went (27).

Friends, this is how God works in his people. There is no magic spell to make everything easy; neither are we left to struggle on in our weaknesses. The Spirit was at work in Simeon (and Anna who arrived **at that very moment** – 38). The Spirit was at work, but they were willing, they listened, they trusted, they obeyed.

And if I'm honest, I mostly experience the Spirit's guidance like I imagine they did on that day: a nudge to do this, to go there, to say that. I am still learning to listen; sometimes I miss the nudge, sometimes I don't but I ignore it – I pray that most of the time I hear it and follow it.

Like Guide Dog puppies we have to learn how to walk in step with the Spirit as Simeon did. It takes deliberate effort and time in prayer and, I'm afraid to say, silence. Learning to be still, to be quiet before God, is a key skill in hearing the Spirit guide us.

Obviously we need to do stuff – Simeon had to actually go **into the temple courts** to meet Jesus – but we need to listen *before* we go. It would have been no good for Simeon to go to the wrong place, or go to the right place but on the wrong day.

However works for you, can I urge you to find a way to make space, time, and *quiet* for listening to God?

Revelation and response

Two priests stood by the side of the road holding up a sign saying, ‘The end is near! Turn before it’s too late!’

A car slowed down as it neared them. The driver wound down his window and yelled, ‘Leave us alone you religious nuts!’ And with that, he sped past.

From round the corner they heard a splash.

One priest said to the other, ‘Do you think it would have been better for the sign to say, “Collapsed bridge” instead?’

Simeon’s prayer is famous as the *Nunc dimittis*, its first words in Latin. Along with the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus* in chapter 1, it is often used as part of formal daily prayer services, particularly Night Prayer, or Compline.

It is a wonderfully tender prayer. Simeon holds Jesus **in his arms** (28) and says, **‘my eyes have seen your salvation’** (30). For him salvation was a plan but more importantly a person, a baby named Jesus – the name that means ‘God saves’. Here at last – *now* (29) – God has fulfilled his promises, God has brought his **light** and **glory** (32) into the world: to reveal (32) and to save (30).

Everything Simeon says is directed at God: **you have promised, you may dismiss, your servant** (29), **your salvation** (30), **which you have prepared** (31), **your people Israel** (32). How we pray reveals our heart; and Simeon's heart was pointing at God.

It's a wonderful prayer, a tender moment between Simeon and that young family. Yet it isn't all he said. We saw just now that God doesn't do everything by himself – we have a part to play as well. The Spirit works in us; our part is to listen, trust, and obey.

As Simeon prayed, salvation is all God's work: he **promised it** (29), he has **prepared it** (31), it is all his (30). The question for us is this: how will we respond to it? Simeon prophesied:

'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Luke 2.34-35 (NIV)

In Jesus salvation is offered to *all* – but it is not received by all. Many will rise – the word means resurrection – but others will fall. The hard truth is that how we respond to Jesus reveals the deepest truth about us, hidden deep within our hearts.

The hard side to redemption is the animosity, the great cost, the conflict, enmity, and opposition that Jesus faced and that his followers will too, the fact that not everyone recognises or welcomes Jesus as Simeon did.

Jesus strips everything away to reveal what we are truly like. The most important question we must all answer is this: will we respond to Jesus with open arms like Simeon?

We have seen today:

1. Some wonderful examples of various different people living godly lives, in piety and simple trust.
2. How the Spirit works in partnership with us – we need to learn and make time to listen and obey as he prompts us.
3. That we need to respond to all God has done for us in Jesus, to accept this great salvation with open arms.

I wonder this week can we as a church family grow a little bit more like these devout people, listening to and walking in step with the Spirit, responding to Jesus with open arms?