

Sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham on 29th January 2017 - Candlemas
Luke 2:22-40

Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God;
but only he who sees takes off his shoes;
the rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Simeon and Anna were those who see. While people around carried on their daily routine, plucking blackberries so to speak, Simeon and Anna were looking. They noticed God coming into the Temple that day as a tiny, vulnerable, dependent baby. And they stopped to recognise God's presence – not to literally take off their shoes, but to recognise that where they were was holy ground.

I wonder when we have occasion to take off our shoes in recognition of God's presence.

There's a lot of waiting in the passage we've just heard. For Mary and Joseph, nine months of waiting for the baby to be born, followed by 40 days of waiting for Mary's purification after childbirth, for the opportunity to present the baby Jesus at the Temple and to make a sacrifice. For Simeon and for Anna a lifetime of waiting to see what God was going to do. For God's people, the people of Israel, hundreds of years of waiting for the promised Messiah.

Actually, perhaps a better way of putting it is that there's a lot of fulfilment of waiting in the passage we've just heard. Mary and Joseph's wait to bring Jesus to the Temple is fulfilled: they can offer their sacrifice, Mary can once again take a full part in religious life and Jesus has been offered back to God as were all firstborn males. Simeon and Anna recognise in Jesus the one for whom they've been waiting. And what the two of them are recognising is that the waiting of all God's people is over; this is the one in whom God's promise will be fulfilled.

One thing about waiting is that it entails waiting for something. In this passage that all hinges around Jesus: Jesus as the way God will comfort and rescue and set free his people. Jesus as the way God will make his people whole. In Jesus, in this little baby, is the beginning of something new.

I wonder what it is that we wait for.

Another thing about waiting is that it entails some degree of either hope or dread. You wait in anticipation of something. It may be a feared outcome, or a longed-for outcome; but whichever it is, there is some emotion invested in it. In this passage it is hope which surrounds Jesus. He is the one through whom God and God's creation will be brought into close relationship, as at the beginning. He is the one through whom God will demonstrate his love, so that all his creation will know how loved they – we – are. In Jesus, in this little baby, is the hope of not just Mary and Joseph, not only Simeon and Anna, but of all God's people.

I wonder where it is that we place our hope.

Waiting is active. It entails watchfulness, readiness, expectation. Simeon, the passage says, was "righteous and devout"; it was God's Spirit who guided him to the Temple on that particular day, and to Jesus. Anna, the passage says, "never left the Temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day". When something happened, she made sure she was in the right place to know about it. They both made sure that when God was ready to act they would be ready to notice him.

I wonder how we ensure that we are ready to notice God.

Something else about waiting is that it requires patience. For Anna and Simeon this had been years of waiting. For God's people as a whole it had been centuries. And when a wait becomes a long wait, it can be easy to get disillusioned, fed up, lose focus. The passage says that it had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he wouldn't die before he'd seen the Messiah. And Simeon held on to that.

I wonder what it is that we hold on to.

Another thing about waiting is that it is for a reason. We wait because we're expecting something to happen, because something needs to change, because we want something better, or bigger, or different. For God's people at the time of Anna and Simeon their setting needed to change: they lived in a volatile country, occupied territory where peace was not real peace but was filled with tensions and they were waiting for God to set them free. But more than that, their relationship with God was also struggling as many couldn't meet the religious demands that were being put upon them; the framework that was meant to help them with their faith had become a straitjacket. God had promised change, and they were waiting because they were longing for that change.

I wonder what change it is that we long for.

And into that waiting came God. Not as a transcendent being; not descending in power and might to overthrow enemies; but in a most unexpected way, as a baby, vulnerable and dependent, to walk alongside his people, his loved creation. And even in that most unexpected of ways, Simeon and Anna saw that God was present.

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Into that waiting God came. And yet in our opening hymn we sang "Longing for light, we wait in darkness". Into that waiting God came, the longed-for Messiah, bringing change, fulfilling hope, transforming lives – and yet our world is troubled, many despair. Into that waiting God came – and yet we still wait.

In the days before the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in prison, he prayed with other prisoners:

In me it is dark, but with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not desert me;
My courage fails me, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace;
in me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience.

We live in a time of now-but-not-yet. Jesus brought in God's kingdom – but it will not be fully realised until his return. The light has come – but until his return there is still much darkness. We are God's loved children who have only to learn to live in relationship with God, to live loved by God, to love God, and to love those around us as people who are also loved by God – but until his return there is still much loneliness and division and restlessness. For us, too, then, we are waiting, longing for change, longing not for the coming of God's promised Messiah but for the fulfillment of what that coming set in motion. Longing for there to be more than glimpses of light, something more like the declaration at our baptism that God has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light!

I wonder, then, how we can wait.

Perhaps the clue is in the hymn with which we began this morning. That hymn is a prayer. It's not an individual prayer, it's a corporate prayer, a community prayer, because as church we are the body of Christ, one body, gathering around one table, to share in one bread. Together we prayed: "Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you. Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see. Christ, be our light. Shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light. Shine in your church gathered today."