

First Sunday of Christmas – YrB – 31 December 2023

Message: Waiting and recognising God's time

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, communities, and communion, may we come to know you the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

Luke captures Christ's themes of inclusivity and equality not only in the words of Christ but also in the way in which he tells the gospel, good news, of Christ.

Luke uses a number of parallels throughout the gospel, starting with a parallel structure between Zechariah and Mary, revelation, special birth, song, and repeated phrases, bring out a series of similarities.

Zechariah and Mary are also starkly contrasting. An old priest, married for years, and a young unmarried poor woman. The former struck dumb because he will not believe, the later accepting God's word and will. Luke is pointing to God's work in the lives of young and old, women and men, and perhaps those who follow reluctantly and those who follow with a little more trust, God does not discriminate. The theme of inclusion continues throughout the gospel, first with some unholy shepherds, and now with Simeon and Anna.

Luke frames the section we read today with an illustration of Jesus' upbringing as a good Jewish boy. Luke reminds us, five times, that Mary and Joseph were following the law. We are to be left in no doubt about Jesus' upbringing.

In this passage we have two separate ceremonies combined: the purification of Mary and the presentation of a first born son. In Hebrew law, Mary was considered impure because

she had given birth. Joseph, by contact with Mary, was probably also considered impure. So, the 'them' at the start of the passage may refer to Mary and Joseph rather than Mary and Jesus. Jesus did not need purification; as a first born child he was in a state of being consecrated to the Lord, and so needed to be redeemed from God, a separate ceremony.

I doubt that I am alone in struggling with purity laws. They leave one group included and 'in the right' and another excluded and 'in the wrong'. There is sometimes an underlying logic or belief behind purity laws that may not be apparent in our thinking today but more often such laws seem to be about the exercise of power.

For an added twist in the case of the purification laws (*Leviticus 12*) after giving birth, the time for the mother was forty days following the birth of a boy and eighty days following the birth of a girl. I've had a bit of a read of Jewish feminist theology on the topic and the best that seems to be offered is a complete reinterpretation of the purity laws.

In the life of Christ, we see that he paid limited regard to the purity laws around women. Mary Magdelene and Mary and Martha were his friends, we often lose sight of how extraordinary this was. He healed women without hesitation, he spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well. There is no hint of discrimination or power play.

One commentator valiantly tries to redeem the law pointing out that the time of purification allowed for the woman some rest from the normal activities of daily life. I am not sure how valid that would be as no doubt the new mother would have been expected to continue with many activities. At a practical level, Mary and Joseph do not seem to have had family

support around them so, between them, probably had to get on with all the tasks of daily life while adapting to the presence of this new life with them.

There is an interesting underlying assumption about sacrifices, that the requirement for a male unblemished animal for the greatest offerings is a sign of giving the best to God. Yet, in my limited knowledge of farming, male animals are generally the more expendable. This does not remove the cost of the offering but practically it does mean you are still able, with just a few male animals and plenty of female animals, to gain plenty more animals. Reverse the balance and you are in trouble! It's just a thought and I really should see if someone has explored it properly somewhere.

The second ceremony mentioned is the presentation of Christ. Every first born male, both animal and human, was to be dedicated to the Lord (*Exodus 13.2, 12-13*), animals were to be sacrificed, boys to be redeemed, at the cost of five shekels. The cost of redemption could be paid anywhere in Israel. As Bethlehem is less than six miles from Jerusalem, it is no surprise that Mary and Joseph chose to travel there for the ceremony.

Luke does not mention the act of redeeming the infant Jesus, only the presentation to the Lord. Commentators do not see this as significant but it is hard not to see the echo of the life of Sammuell who was presented to the Lord at the temple for a life of service. One assumes Mary and Joseph did redeem Jesus as required. However, Luke appears to be allowing us to recall Samuel and to anticipate a life of service for Christ.

We now meet two quite remarkable characters. Simeon and Anna are waiting patiently to play their part in God's purpose.

They provide different views on the future but both recognise that God's redeemer is with them. Simeon tells Mary that her heart will be pierced. Anna praises God for what is to come. Both are correct; there will be pain along the way but what is coming is truly wonderful.

We are told that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon and that Anna, was a prophetess, a term that was rarely used, fasted and prayed in the temple every day, and just in case we were doubting her holiness that she was married for seven years, seven being the perfect number in Hebrew thought, and that she was eighty four, which is twelve times seven, even more perfect, if such a thing is possible.

In telling us of both a man and a woman, Luke continues the theme of God's inclusivity. The theme is picked up directly in Simeon's words:

'a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

Christ has come for everyone.

These are two holy and blessed people and what do they spend most of their time doing? Waiting! Not rushing around doing, not doing good but waiting for God's moment when the Christ Child would arrive in the temple with their hearts and minds open to what God is doing.

God gives us all different roles in life. For some it will be to do great works but for others it will be to wait and to be; learning to be in God's presence, open to seeing the world as God sees it. For most of us it will be a mixture of the two, waiting and doing. There will be times to work and do and

times when we are to wait and just be. Be still; be still and know; be still and know that I am God, says the psalmist.

When we wait, we wait and watch with the eyes of Christ. We see the equality and inclusion that Christ saw. We include young and old alike, female and male alike, religious and irreligious alike, in everyone we see we seek the image of God.

Many of us are waiting to see true equality and inclusion in the world. We need the wisdom to know what we can do now and the serenity to wait for the rest. We need God's spirit resting upon us, as it did on Anna and Simeon.

We wait for the right time. If we have a sense of calling, we must be aware of God's timing. When it is God's timing, things have a habit of falling into place in ways that we could never have anticipated. So, whether we are in a season of waiting or doing, we need the gift of waiting, waiting for God's time and God's gifts.

Many of us find it difficult to wait but that is a part of God's calling and if we can embrace it we will know God's blessing, and perhaps one day we will pray with Simeon, 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.' **Amen, Amen.**