Sermon for 1st of Christmas Year B

Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40

i

Wait, there’s even more to come! If you are still groaning after your Christmas dinner and all that you have eaten since; if you have still to take a proper look at some of the presents you received, because you got so many; you may not be as thrilled as you should be to hear the Good News: “There’s more to come”! Yet this is the message of our readings today.

Isaiah, usually referred to as Third Isaiah in these later chapters of return and restoration, declares that the exiles shall soon return home from their captivity in Babylon. They have been held in slavery for about 50 years, some for 60 years.

Zion will not just be restored physically, but shall be restored spiritually too. The time of punishment has been served; the slate has been wiped clean and now Zion shall see righteousness, faith and justice flourish. The city shall be known for its righteousness and be acknowledged by foreign kings. No longer shall the city be known as a deserted place, but shall be known as the one in whom God delights like a husband delights in his bride. Zion shall be like a royal diadem in the hand of God.

This is not just a longed for return home, but a triumphant and hopeful return. They are being given a new chance with God and great things await them. This is more than they could ever have dreamed of through their years of captivity. Yet this is what more God is willing to offer them.

In Luke 2:22-40 we meet Simeon and Anna at the temple in Jerusalem. In many ways they are symbolic of the national mood. They spend their days in and around the temple complex, probably among those begging. They are both deeply devout people. Simeon has been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die before he has met Israel’s ‘consolation’, that is, her Messiah.

Anna the Prophetess is an elderly widow who prays and fasts in the temple and she too perceived who the infant Jesus was. These two people represent the longing of Israel for their saviour. Eastern Orthodox tradition says that Christ met his people in this symbolic encounter.

They reflected the spiritual yearning so widespread at the time for more. Simeon and Anna had all that Judaism could offer in a sense; they enjoyed the life of prayer and devotion at the very heart of world Judaism, yet like their compatriots, they yearned for God to give them more – they longed for their Messiah.

So Simeon and Anna should speak to anyone who has ever been in a similar situation of enjoying so much of what God has given, enveloped in the life of faith and yet whose spirits are still troubled, finding no peace because within them is a constant and deep yearning for more.

Protestants do not usually consider praying to saints, asking for their intercession, but I could easily understand why many would turn to Simeon and Anna to intercede for them, to two people who spent most of their lives deeply yearning for more.

We can often feel a bit guilty for wanting more. Perhaps we have in mind that famous scene when Oliver Twist dared to ask for more in the workhouse and was thrown out for his impertinence. Perhaps we feel God will be as offended for our lack of contentment over what he has given us as Mr Bumble was outraged by Oliver.

Well, I have to confess that I am in tune with Anna and Simeon. Yes, I may have so many blessings to be thankful for; I have the mysterious joy of a personal faith in Christ – and yet I yearn for more! I yearn for greater understanding, greater love in my life, greater thirst for righteousness and justice in the world and above all I yearn for the Church to know more of the Spirit’s transforming power.

I may not be granted to live to see such things, but Anna and Simeon reassure me that such yearning is part of our spiritual experience, whatever our blessings, and that some at least will live to see God’s faithfulness revealed once more.

ii

Yet there is a warning within the promise which Simeon faithfully and honestly communicates to Mary: ‘This child is to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel…and a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (v35).

Simeon praises God for the long-awaited gift of the Messiah, but he recognises that the gift will divide the world between those who receive him and those who reject him. Despite Jesus being the source of hope, joy and new life – for some Jesus will be a threat, an unwelcome imposter in their lives and a cause of division among families and communities. There is no easy way around this. Religion, like politics, will always be a source of controversy and strife for as long as men and women have the freedom to accept or reject it. It is a price we pay for the freedom of conscience.

Simeon also hints at the future suffering of Jesus and therefore of his mother Mary also. We see the shadow of the cross fall upon the infant Jesus and glimpse the image of his mother, Mary, standing distraught by the foot of the cross. In Catholic tradition this prophecy of Mary’s future suffering constitutes the first of seven sorrows of Mary. Commemoration of our Lady of Sorrows became popular from the twelfth century in many parts of Europe.

Whilst this may not resonate with Methodists and other Protestants, as with the longing of Simeon and Anna, even non-Catholic Christians may find some consolation in identifying with saints of the past who have been through similar emotional and spiritual experiences.

In last week’s sermon [See Sermon for 4th Advent Year B] we noted that Luke omitted reference to the ‘redemption of the first-born son’ offering in this episode, suggesting that Mary may have made the usual purification offering of the two doves, but did not make the traditional offering which symbolised buying her first-born son back from God’s service because she knew Jesus was born precisely to be God’s servant.

If we take a closer look now at the sacrifice for purification which Jewish tradition demanded women should make 40 days after giving birth, we may find Luke is making another subtle point.

Most commentators suggest that the choice to sacrifice two doves reveals that Mary and Joseph were poor people who opted for the cheaper sacrifice of doves rather than the more expensive offering of a lamb.

However, some suggest that Luke is trying say that since Jesus is the true Lamb of God, no other lamb was appropriate. Therefore, the doves were chosen in preference to the lamb. This interpretation is an interesting possibility, but it is rather speculative.

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Simeon’s prayer of thanksgiving has become a well-known liturgical prayer in many Christian traditions; it often features in the services of Evensong and Compline. The prayer is known as the *nunc dimittis*, which are the first words in Latin of Simeon’s prayer, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.”

The prayer is a prayer of personal thanksgiving for having been granted the opportunity of seeing the birth of the Messiah, but the prayer moves onto a more universal note:

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.

From the beginning, the call of Abraham was to create a special representative people of God who would be the channel through which God would bless all families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). Here again we see this universal meaning of the birth of Jesus. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was fighting against narrow nationalistic interpretations of the Messiah.

Anna too hints at the universal significance of the Christ child, for she ‘spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem’ (v38).

Now the festivities of Christmas are largely over again for another year, it is time for us to ask ourselves how privileged we truly feel to have witnessed the birth of the Christ child once again through the eyes of faith. Do we share Simeon and Anna’s joy? Or do we take the privilege for granted? Do we accept the possible cost of discipleship to which Simeon alerted Mary? Have we still the vision and faith to tell others the Good News as Anna exemplified?

We may have un-wrapped the true gift of Christmas in worshipping the Christ Child. Today we ask ourselves what we are going to do about it.

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