

Sermon

I wonder how everyone is feeling, on this second Sunday of the interregnum. It has probably left many of us feel rather unsettled. We may have feelings of sadness, a sense of loss, apprehension, or perhaps anticipation of what lies ahead, even caution at the unknown. I can certainly relate to some of those sentiments.

We have been left a great legacy and now we have the task of maintaining all that goes on at St Mary's. It is a tall order, but we are blessed to be led by Chris and Cynthia and we will, of course, be helped by a range of visiting clergy.

But what I really want to think about today is the role of the congregation, who are the lay people, in this church. You are the ones who, through **faith**; give of your time to keep things, not just running smoothly, but extremely well. I *know* there are many people in our church community who quietly get on with great work, without make a show of it. I am so often amazed to hear of what people do here, both young and old.

So as we move forward, possibly a little daunted, it is important that we encourage and motivate one other. Most of all we are going to have to draw on our **faith** and have **courage**.

It is so often my experience that, when I feel rather overwhelmed, God places a piece of scripture before me which I find reassuring and inspiring.

This is, without doubt, the case with our Gospel reading this morning as we celebrate Candlemas, the presentation of Christ in the temple.

As I read Luke's account of this ritual, I see models of **immense faith and courage** in the holy family and their encounter with Anna and Simeon.

Mary and Joseph, have *already* displayed these qualities, putting their *complete* trust in God, from the time of the annunciation, through to the virgin birth of a child they are told is the Son of God.

And now, following the Jewish Law, they have made their journey to the temple, the centre of Israel's spiritual life. They have made this journey for two purposes:

Firstly, it is for the purification of the Mary. The Law required that, forty days after giving birth to a male child, a woman, who was considered ritually unclean, must come to the temple for purification. In order for *this* to happen, they must make a

sacrifice. For those who were poor, as in the case of Mary and Joseph, the sacrifice would have been a pair of doves or two young pigeons.

The second ritual they had to perform was to present Jesus in the temple. The Law dictated that every firstborn male child, born during the Passover, belonged to God and must be *bought back* from him for five shekels.

But for Mary and Joseph, their experience goes much *further* than the presentation of Jesus, when they have an almost startling encounter with Simeon.

Here is a man who is well advanced in years, righteous and devout. Simeon has previously received a promise from the Lord that *he will not see death* until he has seen the Messiah. He has been longing and praying for this moment, and now, recognizing Jesus to be the Messiah; this elderly man takes the child in his arms and blesses God.

Simeon is *finally* able to accept death with God's promise of salvation. Importantly, when this is a promise made, it is not *only* to Simeon, but is offered to *all of humanity*.

The sight of the child, the arrival of the promised one, then stirs from within Simeon a song born of the peace of knowing that God will bring glory to the people, Israel, and provide "a light of revelation to the Gentiles".

He is so filled with deep joy at this moment that he is moved to sing the particularly beautiful words, widely known as the Nunc Dimittis.

I am going to repeat the words of his song from the King James version of the Bible, where they are the most beautiful:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

³⁰ *For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,*

³¹ *Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;*

³² *A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*

Of course the words are more powerful, when sung, as those of you who have attended sung evensong know or perhaps heard it at a funeral.

It is a poignant moment and Simeon as plays a *crucial* role in the story.

We are told that Simeon, like Anna, is a prophet - probably not a priest – more likely he is what we would call *a lay person*. They are both elderly and pious. According to Luke, Anna is has been a widow for 84 years, having been married for only seven. In those days, girls might have married as early as age 14. A widow in Palestinian society had a very low status. They would have lived a marginal existence, often in extreme poverty.

Anna never leaves the Temple but worships night and day, fasting and praying. Yet her lifestyle seems to invigorate her, for she is mobile, articulate, alert, spiritually aware and unselfish. Luke presents her positively, as a woman without the bitterness, that may come with age, and as one full of hope.

It is notable that Anna, one of the poorest of the poor, was the one privileged to greet the infant Messiah in the temple.

So here we witness in Simeon and Anna, immense *faith*, and *courage*.

In Mary and Joseph too, in all they have encountered. And now, they hear the confirmation that their child is destined to be the Saviour of the world, and then the *hard-hitting* words that Mary's heart will be pierced through with a sword of pain, as she will see her son die on the cross.

Faith and Courage

Over the next few months, during the course of the interregnum, as we carry out God's work in this church community.... may **we** look to the courage and faith of Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna as we continue to offer a welcome, love and hospitality to all who come here and seek the presence of God.

Amen