

Two old people

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Luke 2:21-40

Well — Christmas has come again.

Jesus has been born again, angels have sung, and people around the world have gathered as families and attended to others so that the day of Christ's birth is a day of celebration, love and hopefully grace.

It is also a day when we especially focus on children, and we remember our own childhood and sense of wonder, and we try to give children of today that same experience of wonder and delight.

And all this is good.

And all this is right.

But today, in our very lovely and human gospel, we focus on two old people, on their expectations, on their hopes, and their dreams.

There is something very special and particular in the writing of Luke which has led the editors of this much respected NRSV study bible to describe Luke as a "gifted literary artist who produced what has justly been described as "the most beautiful book in the world."

Wow! We had better look more closely to see what he has to say about these two old people, and see what message it has for us today.

The reading starts straight after the shepherds return to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all they had seen in the stable.

Remember Luke is a gentile medical doctor who did not know Jesus personally, but lived with the apostles and spent two years with Paul when he was in prison.

Luke addresses his gospel to a fellow non Jew, probably a high ranking official named Theophilus.

The passage begins with a description of three ancient ceremonies which every first-born Jewish male child or his mother had to undergo.

i) Circumcision:

On the 8th day after his birth, could even be done on the Sabbath, and on this day the child received his name.

ii) The Redemption of the Firstborn.

According to the law every firstborn male, both of human beings and of cattle, was sacred to God. It was laid down that for the sum of 5 shekels the parents could, as it were, buy back their son from God. The sum had to be paid to the priests. It could not be paid sooner than 31 days after the birth of the child and it might not be long delayed after that.

iii) The Purification after childbirth: When a woman had borne a child, if it was a boy she was unclean for 40 days, if it was a girl, for 80 days.

She could go about her household and her daily business but she could not enter the temple or share in any religious ceremony. At the end of that time she had to bring to the temple a lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon for a sin offering. That was a somewhat expensive

sacrifice, and so the law laid it down that if she could not afford the lamb she might bring another pigeon instead. The offering of the two pigeons instead of the lamb and the pigeon was technically called The Offering of the Poor.

Luke states what they brought to the temple two doves or pigeons. (without going on about it being the offering of the poor.)

These three ceremonies are strange old ceremonies, but all three have at the back of them the conviction that a child is a gift of God, indeed the stoics used to say that a child was not given to a parent but only lent by God.

Then we have this lovely interlude about two old people who spent most of their time in the temple.

Firstly Simeon — a man good and pious. He was waiting for the “comforting of Israel and the Holy Spirit was with him. He believed he had received a message from the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s messiah, the one who would save and deliver Israel. That was what he was waiting for. And guided by the Spirit Simeon came into the temple, took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word”.... What we call the *Nunc Dimittis*, which comes from the way the first words sound in Latin, and what we say in evening prayer and compline, the prayer at the end of the day, and what is traditionally said by priests at a funeral as they lead the coffin from the church.

Dismissing your servant has the meaning of manumission or releasing of a slave. Simeon is now a truly free man to live or die.

Mary and Joseph were amazed and then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary.

Notice those words — to his mother Mary — scholars recognize that Luke has a special sensitivity to women, perhaps because as a doctor he had had more to do with women, perhaps because of the possibility that he came from a good family from Macedonia where women had a higher standing in society than in Israel. We don’t know for sure, but what we do have are his words which are said to Mary:

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Wow, again! Being a cradle middle-of-the-road Anglican, and therefore not much into Mary, it was only about ten years ago that my attention was drawn to these words. I needed a Dominican father from the Watson priory to draw my attention to those amazing words about Mary’s future suffering.

The foreshadowing of her pain at being with her son as he was crucified in a place of disgrace between two thieves. Where were the angels then to free him and take him straight to heaven?

Perhaps Luke being a non-Jew wondered about what right God to take a 14 year old girl child, make her pregnant, and then let her son die slowly and painfully before her very eyes.

Whether or not Mary is Queen of heaven now, Luke is sensitive to the difficulties and pain she experienced on earth, and gifted story teller that he is, he has Simeon tell the young Mary, and therefore the reader, what is in store for her.

Then Luke introduces Anna, a prophet, not just a holy woman, but a prophet, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of “great age, 84,” she lived at the temple, perhaps

somewhat like Julianne of Norwich, and worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day, still hoping and waiting for the promised one.

Luke brings the two together to further affirm the authority of this new born child with the words: “At that moment she came,”

What is this moment? It is the moment that Simeon was holding Jesus and speaking to Mary, “at that moment she came,... and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

So what message is there for us today? For us older ones, us “elders”, don’t give up, don’t get bitter, don’t withdraw from the world. Keep the faith, however long you seem to be waiting, keep hoping, keep open to the possibility of being touched and guided by the Holy Spirit. Be brave, be ready to say to everybody about you what you believe to be true.

We are old enough to be unafraid of making fools of ourselves! And you younger ones—do not be too ready to dismiss your elders as being out of touch with what is going on in the world, especially the ones who can’t use computers or mobile phones. Remember that your elders existed before these important and wonderful tools were even thought of.

Remember, too, that the most important things in life, things which your elders, including the older members of our congregation, know quite a lot about, things like faith and hope and courage and love, have been valued and known about forever. Amen.