

How do we mark the passing of time? I suspect that each of us will have our own traditions for how we do this. In one family I lived with for a while, on every birthday everyone in the household would sit around together and share a story or a favourite memory of the person whose birthday it was – it was quite amazing. But memories are not always easy. I had an elderly relative in London who lived with Dementia. When I would visit her she would often ask on a loop – what will happen next? And I answer dinner, or lunch or reading or.... And she would say, Oh – and then where will we go?

The pattern of what next, which is important for all of us, helped her have some comfort about the confusion of the world she found herself in. I suspect in many ways, it is the same for us all, patterns, structure, knowing how time is passing helps us to make meaning of what is going on around us.

The liturgical year of the church is designed to mark the passing of time and draw us at the same time to ponder the depths of our faith and ask familiar questions which might allow us to move forward in our believing and understanding. It is designed to help us grow, so that in each season we find that we know

more or have a different or more expended experience of the same season last year.

Today we come to the end of the season of Epiphany. We began this journey in November with the season of Advent – a season of longing for the coming of Christ. At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation (the real presence) of God made human in the world, and throughout Epiphany we explore and acknowledge that Jesus is both human and divine; and we consider how God is made manifest (known) to us, and to others. Then today in our liturgy, we turn from the incarnation at Christmas towards the story of the passion at Easter.

In the Gospel of Luke, the parents of Jesus respond to his birth by attending to the obligations called for in Leviticus 12:3-8. These ancestral traditions are a reminder to them that Jesus is born in the context of the covenant established between God and the people Israel. The language of purification may sound odd to us, but it arises from sensitivity to the holy. Mary and Joseph, are being good faithful parents when they bring Jesus to be presented to the temple. Many parts of the church have a similar practice of thanksgiving for the birth of a child, and in

some places baptism is also a form of this tradition. A routine event for a young faithful family –to give thanks to God for their child: the marking of time.

But as this young family come to mark this birth – something unusual happens – there are others who are looking for signs that the world is turning and time is moving on. At Canberra Aged Care yesterday we were discussing how many babies must have been bought each week to this temple, many of whom Anna and Simeon would have seen - but something else happens here. Not just in the traditions of acknowledging the birth of a child, but in hope for a change in life of earth. I suspect we may be able to relate to this cultural longing for change which is expressed by these elders, because it is one that is expressed daily in our communities – a yearning for there to be a better way – that things need to be different for the world to be a place that is more just and fair.

So it is against this backdrop – the prayer of many people for God to come and change the world - that Mary and Joseph are met by Simeon, a faithful disciple of God, who longs for Israel to be liberated.

Simeon was a devout man we are told – one faithful to God – and a man who listens to the voice of God. Simeon yearned for things to change. He had already lived a long life, and had seen the journey of his people and knew that pain and joys that it entailed. He had been guided by the spirit to understand that he would not die until his yearning had been fulfilled and the messiah would arrive.

It is a very powerful and emotive image – an old man –longing for the freedom his people – with the smell of his mortality surrounding him- holds onto his knowledge that he will not die until the liberator arrives. And so Simeon having seen Jesus speaks:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

May we all be granted such a statement of peace before our deaths – that we might proclaim the yearnings of the spirit within us has been fulfilled!

Simeon is not alone however as someone waiting for the promise of change, for in the account of Jesus presentation we also meet Anna. Note that it is Anna, not Simeon, who is recorded as the prophet. We know this because of the dedication of her life – she fasts and prayers. A pattern we see in the description of the prophets throughout all history. But also because others see her as a prophet. We still use these three markers today in confirming the call of a person to be a sole servant of God. We ask them to demonstrate their dedication to prayer and spiritual disciplines – and we ask the community to confirm that they believe God has bestowed upon them this gift. So it is the authority of Anna as a prophet – a spiritual and faithful servant of God who also proclaims that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

This image of the Jesus presentation in the temple is the image of humanity longing for God, but also an image of God longing for us to recognise and respond to this immense love. While for Anna and Simeon their praying and longing is fulfilled in the arrival of the Christ Child, for us we both live with the joy that God is with us, but long for all to

know Christ, and ultimately -we long for the coming of the Kingdom of God here on earth. We, like Simeon and Anna in many ways, are a people longing for the liberation of the world, and liberation which will bring justice for all people. But how do we live with this tension of having the light, and longing for the light of God?

I have been wondering about this a lot lately – how we hold this tension of living with, as well as longing. I wondered it as I watched the footage of Bishop Sarah being confirmed as Archbishop of Canterbury on Thursday heard the voices of descent because she is a woman, because of her statements on inclusion and justice; I wondered as I listen to news out the Iran, or the Ukraine or Iran... ; I wonder as I meet people who are alone or hungry in our own wealthy city; and I wonder about this everyday as we pray for an end to violence, war, oppression and hunger. How are we a people of light, who are also still longing? How are we a people who believe salvation has been found in Christ; but who still yearn for the transformation of God's spirit in our world.

This however was the question for Anna and Simeon too – the world did not immediately

transform the moment they saw God. Rather the light of what they saw sustained their prayers – allowed them to turn to the next moment. Our faith is not about what is, but about what we hope to become – the yearning of the spirit – our communal yearning of souls. And we do not do this alone!

There is so much we cannot control or even sometimes influence in our world. But our way of faith, our way of life in prayer and service holds this. The integrity of our life and prayer bears witness to the hope we have seen in the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany – and it sustains us, as well as draws others.

This is the heart of Candlemas – a festival of light that illuminates our prayers as we turn towards the reality of the approach of Lent. It is the assurance that God's light is in the world amidst all the fear and challenges which might lay before us.

Our daily practice of meditation and prayer, of reading scripture and sharing our yearnings as a community are the reminder of the light which Anna and Simeon saw as they embraced the Christ child. It is a light which sustains us, today and always. Amen.