

## SERMON 31 DECEMBER 2017

The last day of the year! I expect many of us will be wondering how all those days, weeks and months went past so quickly. They hold, inevitably, a mixture of sadness and happiness; there have been things in the world scene that may have made us despair at the direction in which the world and human society seems to be moving. These may be things that don't make us approach 2018 with a great deal of optimism. There may be things within our family situations that slow us down at such a time as we wonder what lies ahead.

But we are here; and this day is still surrounded by the starlight and lamplight of the Bethlehem stable. We are still held within the mystery and wonder, the hope and rejoicing of that time. We can still feel the glow of love that filled the hearts of those people back then and that has continued to bless countless millions of people down the centuries.

Today we continue with Luke as he tells his readers more of the story of mystery and wonder that has broken into the lives of the people of Israel. All through his gospel Luke wants to emphasize how Jesus was birthed, rooted in the promise of the Scriptures; that his coming was indeed a fulfilment of prophecy. This is what we hear today. In this lovely episode we see again how devout were Mary and Joseph as they did everything in accordance with Law and tradition. We also glimpse again their poverty as the sacrifice they offer at the Temple was the one that poor people could afford: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons". Here they dedicate their child to God.

This simple story is then lifted into another realm of the mystery of God's purpose as we hear about Simeon and Anna. These events emphasize that the infant, now named as Jesus, is a turning point. The old man, Simeon, has spent his years not just looking back to the past, as we might be today, but knowing that the long centuries before were waiting for the promised coming of God's Messiah; God's intervention of hope and grace. There was no angelic chorus for him, no starlight; but there was the moving of the Holy Spirit within his expectant heart that led him to the Temple. What did he think he might find? Surely he had no idea, but he did know that God was going to reveal to him whatever it was. Here we see a life lived day by day through the ordinariness and difficulties that are ever present, a life where hope held firm because Simeon trusted that God was working God's purpose out. So he made his perhaps slow and painful way to the Temple and sees the baby. This is his Christmas Day, his Epiphany moment, the moment where he knows, beyond doubt, that God's promise was being fulfilled. Not just the promise to Simeon himself that he would not die before he had seen this, but the promise to all of Israel, and, we can say, to the whole world. How immensely moving that he can gather up the baby into his arms, look on him and say: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

What an extraordinary example of faith and hope! So much lay ahead of this tiny baby that Simeon would never know, but what his long years of focussing on God had given him was a belief that, no matter what else was going on around, God remained faithful and the only thing in which to trust, even when there was pain and sorrow involved.

Luke, throughout his gospel, pairs an account of something related to a man with something related to a woman. He emphasizes that this journey of faith is equally demonstrated by men and by women. He does it here by telling of Anna, the very old and long-widowed faithful woman whose life had been centred on prayer and fasting in the Temple for more than sixty years. She is drawn into this scene as she also sees in the baby the hope of redemption for the future. She adds her blessing.

We have had our Christmas Day moment for this year. We have celebrated the fact that the birth of Jesus is the fulfilment of hope, peace, joy and love, God's promised involvement made flesh. Now in this pause at the close of a year and before the dawning of the next, we cradle this promise that has echoed down the centuries and that moves beyond us into the unknown. It places us in our particular moment, a moment which is always pivotal as we search for its meaning; this moment in which alone we can live and in which we are asked to take hold of God's hope, in faith, whatever may lie ahead. We can look to Simeon and Anna and see examples of faithful hope. But there are also other voices around that remind us of what it might mean for us to live in this hope in our particular moment in time.

One such voice that Clive and I have come to appreciate is not that of an officially religious person, though it seems he would call himself Christian. Surprisingly enough he is a political commentator in USA whose reflections we look forward to on SBS at 1pm on a Saturday, part of SBS' daily broadcast at that time of PBS Newshour from Washington. His name is David Brooks, and along with his colleague, Mark Shields, he provides great insight into what is happening in US' political scene.

This is not the background you might think would find its way into a sermon, but then, as I think we understand, God works in and through all kinds of people and God's wisdom is not just contained within the church. So, as we reflect on how we are being called to live in faith and hope in our particular moment in time, here is what he says:

“In this scheme of things we don't create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside; they are found outside. This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life, you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? As the novelist Fredrick Buechner puts it, "At what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world's deep need?"

Yes, we might want to avoid looking very closely at the myriad of issues that challenge the peace and wholeness of the earth and its peoples because they are overwhelming. But what David Brooks points to is the need to discern what is around us in our particular lives and our particular moment in time. Only then can we realistically hold out hope for one another and for those around us, when we have looked with the eyes of faith. It is when we do that that we glimpse how God is indeed at work and inviting us to be part of that journey that takes us from the

cradle to the cross and to life. Let's remember Simeon and Anna as we move on again.

So, on the cusp of a new year, when, doubtless there will be the great partying and celebration, fireworks and loud music that accompany many people's hopes for the new beginning, the slate that is, for a brief moment, quite clean – we are here, still cradling the baby and knowing how deeply we need to cherish what this child promises. We do not know the future. We may be unsure of what might be asked of us or what we could offer, but we do know that this is the moment in which we are placed and so it is a God-given moment. We hold God's hope in our hearts so that we may live in the present for the sake of the future. The incarnation of Christ, with all that lay ahead for the infant Jesus, including, as Simeon saw, the sword that would pierce Mary's soul, the incarnation makes all this possible. God is with us. Thanks be to God!