

Sunday 29th January 2023

So who is good at waiting? Anyone who knows me, will know I'm not very patient when it comes to waiting for something. Maybe some of you are waiting for the sighting of the Green Comet next week. Astronomers calculated that it had an orbital period of 50,000 years. That would put its last journey this close to Earth as back in the Stone Age. That's some wait!

Having been blessed with our first child, Daniel, we were surprised when the wait for our second child was a bit longer. Nearly 2 years. We prayed and waited. A mum's group I attended on a Monday morning, prayed for us too (along with two other mums also trying for their second child). Finally, after about 2 years, just before the summer break our prayers were answered - for 3 of us and with the same due date too! Our wait was finally over and our prayers had been answered and we were blessed with our second child, Emily. Abraham and Sarah never thought in their mature years that they would have children but again their wait was over when they were blessed with their son Isaac.

In today's bible reading, the people of Israel have been waiting for a king. Compared to waiting for our second child, we waited no time at all. Abraham and Sarah waited for many years and the people of Jesus' day had waited generations and generations.

But before I discuss more about the people who were waiting in today's reading, let's start at the beginning of the passage which introduces the reason why Joseph and Mary have brought their first-born child to the temple in Jerusalem. Following Jewish tradition, 40 days after He is born, Jesus is taken to Jerusalem for his mother's purification and his dedication where he is named holy to the Lord as the first-born male. This is just a normal part in the life of Jewish male child. His parents are obviously not wealthy as they don't have the lamb sacrifice as set out in the book of Leviticus but rather the poor man's version of two turtle doves or two young pigeons. As an aside, the offering for sacrifice was made in order for Mary to receive purification as it is thought that before 40 days after the birth of the child, the woman is seen as unclean.

As they go to make the sacrifice, they are met by two people who have been waiting, longing and hoping for something special to happen, the arrival of the Messiah. Simeon, was righteous and devout and the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. Here was Simeon holding baby Jesus, satisfied that his prayers had been answered. Those of you who have held a baby in your arms know what a magical and wonderful moment it is; at the same time, you appreciate the fragility and envision potential, and you feel warmth and experience love. In addition to this, Simeon felt true peace and comfort in his heart, knowing that because of this child, Israel, and even the rest of the Gentile world, would be in good hands. Simeon was very aware of the declining national and spiritual state of Israel, but here, God revealed his plan for their consolation: it was not a gift of overflowing wealth so they could be in luxury nor was it a natural disaster to destroy the mighty Roman Empire and give them political independence again. It was a... baby; a helpless, defenceless, little... baby. This baby is God's salvation. This baby is the light of revelation.

Anna also recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the one sent to redeem Israel and who had been foretold. She told all the others who were waiting expectantly for the redemption of Israel, about the child brought to the temple. I suspect that when Anna did speak (although it's not recorded here), she was in full of praise to God for bringing his Son, his salvation.

Both Simeon and Anna had been waiting. We don't know how long Simeon had been waiting - a lot of people assume he is old as he says that now he has seen his Saviour, he can die but nowhere in the Bible does it specify his age. However, I get the feeling he has been waiting a long time, his entire life in fact, to see the Messiah the Holy Spirit told him he would see. Anna we know, was married 7 years before being widowed and is now 84 years of age and has dedicated her life to prayer and fasting, spending day and night at the temple.

If we look at the meaning of Simeon's life, we can say that it was that he expected and was there at a precise moment. He is now withdrawing so that others can also see the light and salvation coming

for Israel and the Gentiles. Anna is also devout and with a purified heart is to be guided by the Spirit. In addition, she belongs to the smallest of the tribes, the Asher tribe. This could be seen as a sign that the small and fragile are those who are more able to recognize Jesus, the Saviour.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph must have thought about these two people who approached them on this significant day. Mary must have seen something in Simeon that she trusted to allow him to take her first-born into his arms and claim that this child to be the salvation for all to see and 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.' I think they would have been comforted by his words and his blessings over them. But then Simeon turns to Mary specifically and says that 'this child' is destined to unsettle the people, that he will be spoken against and that he will expose the secret thoughts of many hearts. Ending with a warning to Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul too. Hard words to hear in this prophecy from Simeon. Mary is being told that her as the earthly mother of this messiah, her life will not be an easy one, and that there will be unimaginable pain and darkness to bear. Mary, represents here, the path of trust, from the moment the Angel Gabriel brought her news that she would bear a Great son, who would lead all nations, to this moment now. Mary trusts Simeon, a man of God who's been waiting his entire life for this moment!

Both Simeon and Anna give us the example of devotion to their Lord with the confidence that not only they, but all God's people will be rewarded, that the light that they see will shine upon the whole of Israel and that all God's people will be saved from themselves. So, how easy is it for us to pray to God with confidence that our prayers will be answered? When life is difficult, as it is for many at the moment, how do we keep our faith in our Father, that all will be fine? That we will be able to pay the heating bills and afford our weekly food shop, amongst the other monthly bills. We don't know what the future holds for us, but as Christians we have to put our trust in our Father God to provide for us and guide us on the pathway He has planned for us. Faith is confidence in Jesus Christ. It is confidence in His ability to bring us through every circumstance of life. I know that I will face many trials, temptations and circumstances in my life that are too great for me. But I know that they are not too great for Him. Faith is knowing that by asking our Father God to be beside us during these dark times, is to know He's got our backs. To live otherwise would be to limit ourselves only to those things we can determine by our own senses and thoughts. This would limit God to only those things we understand or imagine.

In John 14:27 it says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Also in Philippians 4:4-7 it says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

If we are to take our lead from Simeon and Anna, then we need to be prepared to wait it out and not get impatient and think we have to sort a situation out ourselves. We need to focus on the main thing - God; through reading scripture, reflection and prayer. And I thank God that here in our partnership of churches in Walton, we have opportunities to do just that daily and weekly, whether through reading the daily inspirations, written by our very own Matt Trendall or attend a weekly/biweekly home group. If we don't do these things, then we're in danger of missing answered prayers - remembering also that the answer may be a yes, a no or a wait. Added to which if we're not careful, we may miss the second coming of Christ. Already over 2000 years have past...are we waiting patiently and are we ready? What are doing to be prepared?

And so finally, a verse from Psalm 130, verse 5, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope,"

Amen