

Great Expectations (Luke 2. 22-40; 1 Cor. 13)

A song came to mind as I sought to prepare this sermon. In 1965, a group named 'Hedgehoppers Anonymous' had a hit record entitled It's Good News Week.

The first couple of verses were:

'It's good news week

Someone's dropped a bomb somewhere

Contaminating atmosphere

And blackening the sky.

It's good news week

Someone's found a way to give

The rotten dead a will to live

Go on and never die.

Have you heard the news?

What did it say?'

That song records, sarcastically, that so often there is no good news, and certainly, when we listen or watch news programmes at the present time, there does appear to be a lack of good news. There seems to be very little for us to look forward to.

But then again, do we have a clear vision of what we are looking forward to or hoping for? In Charles Dickens' novel Great Expectations, young Pip received the news that he had 'Great Expectations'. Pip thought that his offer of a new life as a gentleman came from Miss Havisham but, as the book reveals, it was an entirely different type of benefactor that provided his new future.

Our gospel reading today tells us about two people who had a vision of a wonderful future with God intervening in the world. They had good news and great expectations.

So, let's look at the two golden oldies introduced to us by Luke.

First of all, we have Simeon. He is an old man – possibly of the tribe of Judah (the tribe of Mary and Joseph) – and a native of Jerusalem. He is known for being very devout and for being filled with God's Spirit.

The prophetic voice in Israel had been silent for hundreds of years but Simeon was patiently waiting for the fulfilment of the Messianic Hope of the Jews. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. He was at the Temple on this day because the Holy Spirit had made it clear to him that he should be there.

We do not know how Simeon found Mary and Joseph and the baby. But we do know he was a man on a mission; he had been told that he would meet the Messiah on this day – and he does! He takes the baby in his arms and speaks the words that we know as the Nunc Dimittis – ‘Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word’.

The introduction by Luke of the baby Jesus is that he was born King of the Jews. The revelation given to Simeon confirms that Jesus was to be a light for revelation to the Gentiles as well as bringing glory to Israel. Luke has written his gospel for Gentile believers and so, at the very outset, he makes it clear that it is part of God’s plan to bring salvation to those outside the Jewish faith as well as to the Jews. You and me are included in God’s salvation plan.

But we have to remember that, although this is a universal offer of salvation, this does not mean that it will be received by everyone. It is offered to all; but it has to be considered by each and accepted by each. We have a part in this but, recalling Wendy’s sermon from last Sunday, we remember that it is God who transforms lives – our job is simply to tell that story.

Our second golden oldie is Anna, someone who was about 84 years of age. Anna had had a hard life. She was married for seven years and had been a widow for 60 years or so.

Anna was not a local like Simeon. She was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. This is one of the lost tribes of Israel. Asher had been the second son of Jacob and Zilpah, Leah's maidservant. The tribe had been allocated the coastal lands near Carmel and Tyre in the Promised Land, but they had never secured their ownership of it.

The tribe had eventually been taken away into exile and very nearly disappeared as a tribe altogether.

In her widowhood, Anna had made her way to Jerusalem and spent all her time, day and night, in the Temple Courts. She was renowned for worshipping there the whole time – fasting and praying. Anna's name means 'gracious' and her father's name meant 'face of God' – so in her ministry Anna really was the gracious face of God to all she met.

As with Simeon, Anna was in the Temple for a purpose. God had revealed to her the identity of the child Jesus she met on that day. Anna proclaims to all the people there that this child was to be the redemption of Israel.

After a long period of faithful waiting and of being guided by prayer, both Simeon and Anna have come to the point where they can recognise God in the baby before them.

It is important to see that, unlike us who have the whole gospel story laid out for us in our bibles, these two golden oldies had been led on by their drivenness and longing to look for the Lord. Their sole desire was to see God glorified and to proclaim that to all around them.

Our gospel reading is linked with 1 Corinthians 13 – that wonderful declaration by Paul about the nature of love. The question that was being asked of the Corinthian Church by Paul was: ‘Is your sole desire to see God glorified?’.

In this chapter 13 we see that the answer was no. The Church had gladly received gifts of the Holy Spirit but had become so enchanted with what they could now do, because of God’s Spirit, that they had lost track of God Himself. The gift had become more important than the giver.

When we read verses 4 – 7 about what true love is, we can see a description of the lives of Simeon and Anna, but, more than this, it is a description of God.

If *God* does not insist on His own way, then we are hardly in a position to do so. If *Jesus* bears all things and endures all things, then our impatient need for instant gratification looks very petty. In the words of the King James Version:

‘[Love] Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things’.

Paul’s words and the lives of Simeon and Anna leave us with three questions:

1. Am I still in awe of who God is, of what He has done and of what He continues to do? The lives of Simeon and Anna surely show that they had an overarching desire to see God’s wonder revealed in the world.
2. Am I devoted to the purposes of God – listening to Him and moving in obedience to Him? If we are committed to prayer and listening to God who knows what will be revealed to us?

3. Am I open to the love of God – how wide and high and deep and long it is – and am I willing to share that love with all around me?

I close with the prayer from yesterday's Breathe gathering:

'Like Simeon, may I grow old in hope and wonder.

Like Anna, may I be in love with you all my days.

May I be open to truth, open to surprises.

May I let your Spirit into my life.

May I let your justice change my behaviour.

May I live in the brightness of your joy.'