

# Wait and Trust ...

*... the world will be changed*

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*A sermon given on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, 2nd February 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*Luke 2:22-40*

I wonder, what are you waiting for? We all of us spend so much of our lives waiting for one thing or another, don't we? But I'm not thinking this morning so much of the short term wait, the wait for the doctor's appointment or the wait for the grandchildren's next visit. I'm thinking more about waiting for the bigger things. Maybe that's more noticeable in the first half of life. I remember when I was a child as the youngest of four siblings, I longed to be grown up like my older brothers and to have the freedom and independence that they seem to enjoy. Perhaps when you're younger, there seem to be more of these bigger things to wait for: the right person to marry, perhaps; or the right job; or career progression; or we wait for our first child. But what about those who, if I can put it delicately, are in the second half of life? What are the big things you're still waiting for? When you've achieved your career ambitions or given up on them; when you're retired and the mortgage is paid off and the children have grown up and left home, what are you still waiting for?

The reason I ask about your experience of waiting is that it seems to be a quality shared by the two characters in our gospel reading this morning. Simeon and Anna only appear once in the New Testament, but for a brief moment, they are centre stage here at the end of Luke's narrative about the birth of the Messiah. Simeon and Anna are elderly people; they're both people of faith whose lives have been shaped by a deepening awareness of God's presence and faithfulness. They both happen to be in the temple on the same day that Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to be presented according to the law of Moses, and they're both of them waiting. Interesting that as older people, they're not looking back and focused on what I'm sure was a rich fund of memories. Instead, they're characterised by their waiting - they're looking forward. They're anticipating something that is yet to happen. Simeon was looking forward to the consolation of Israel; Anna was one of those who was looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. That suggests that all was not well in the world in which they were waiting. There's a context of, if you like, national suffering. Israel and Jerusalem need to be consoled and redeemed, both politically and spiritually. From a political point of view, Israel was oppressed under the heel of a foreign power - Judea was occupied by Rome. There were people who thought that, in a sense, Israel's exile in Babylon had never come to an end - the Jewish people might not physically still be in exile in Babylon, but they were still being held captive in their own country; they were still not free; they were still under foreign domination, and they longed for freedom.

But that was linked to a need for spiritual consolation as well, because that state of affairs prompted all sorts of questions about where is God in all of this? Why doesn't he seem to be keeping his promises to set his people free. If he's our God, why isn't he looking after us better? Now you and I today may not be languishing under the heel of the Roman Empire, but we may nevertheless be struggling with events that threaten to overwhelm us? Why doesn't the world seem to be getting any better? Why does so much conflict seem to be endemic in the world? Why is it so many world leaders don't really seem to be interested in peace but are ramping up the tension between nations? Why isn't more happening? Where is our God? Why does he allow this

to happen? And in our personal circumstances, we may be conscious of all sorts of things that we long were different: disappointments; illnesses; things that have jumped out and surprised us that were unwelcome. We ask, where is God in all of this? We long for things to be different.

What Simeon and Anna are able to see because of their patient prayer and waiting is that God isn't necessarily going to come as a great general or president to sort everything out at a political level. Nor do they expect him to come as the creator of the universe to impose his will at some big cosmic level. Instead they are given the grace to recognise that God has come to them as a human child, weak and vulnerable but able to give and receive love. He comes not to direct the play from the safety of the gallery, but to become an actor on the stage, to be part of the action of human history, redeeming it from within, standing alongside the likes of you and me. There is a sense that we're introduced to Jesus at this stage as one who himself is waiting - the baby is passive, he's not an active actor in what's going on; he has to wait until he's grown up and has achieved adulthood before he can have any real agency in the world.

So just as Simeon and Anna are waiting, so in a sense is Jesus. And of course, that waiting is a feature of Jesus's life later on, too. Many commentators have pointed out that there is a change as Jesus's adult ministry develops. Initially, he's hugely active, going around teaching, healing, casting out demons calming storms and feeding crowds, and he's constantly on the move. But as events progress, Jesus becomes more passive until when he's in Jerusalem, his last days are marked by being willing to allow events to take their course without making any attempt to control or direct them and that reflects Jesus's deepening trust in his heavenly Father's ability to work out his purpose through Jesus's trust and vulnerability. In Gethsemani and on the cross, Jesus is waiting for God; waiting for God to come and rescue him, perhaps; waiting for God's vindication to prove that Jesus is right. Eventually on the cross the waiting seems to be in vain. But on the third day, God comes in all his resurrection power, and the waiting is over.

So what about you and me? We look around the world and at our own lives, and we see ourselves often buffeted by forces we cannot control. There are some things we can influence and shape and direct ourselves, but other things we can't. Maybe our lives go through different seasons like Jesus's ministry. Some seasons where we're active and able to shape what happens around us to some degree. Other seasons where we just have to be more patient, where we're unable to influence what happens, and we just have to trust in the goodness of God and his purpose for each of us: and so we wait; we acknowledge our vulnerability and helplessness; we recognise all that is wrong in the world and in our own lives; and as we wait, we pray, *'Your Kingdom come'* - that line in the Lord's prayer, expressing longing for things to be different, but also expressing trust in the God who holds the future. We pray, *'Your Kingdom come'* and then we wait, like Simeon and Anna, for the consolation of God's people and the redemption of Jerusalem.

As we do that, we simply have to wait and trust and our faith is deepened as we recognise our helplessness. Our weakness, as it were, fertilises our faith: we look to God and attune our senses to looking for the signs of his kingdom dawning around us; that our own eyes, like Simeon, may see the Lord's salvation taking shape in our lives and in the life of the church and those around us; that we may recognise his presence and make ourselves available to him.

Even though we cannot change the world ourselves through patient waiting and prayer, we may make ourselves available for the God of transformation - the God who makes all things new - to change the world, even through the likes of you and me.

# Reading Text

## Luke 2:22-40

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.' <sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup> 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' <sup>33</sup> And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' <sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.