

Sunday 2nd February – Candlemas

Malachi 3:1-5

Hebrews 2:14-end

Luke 2:22-40

How do you cope with waiting?

The other day Kate had to phone the doctors to make an appointment. She got through fairly quickly but the message was “Welcome to the surgery. Your call is important to us and you are in a queue. You are caller number 36 in the queue”

Waiting.

Waiting time can easily become wasted time. We tend to think of it as lost time; time we can never get back; time we didn't use as we might have done.

Today's gospel reading tells us the story of Simeon and Anna – two people who were waiting. Waiting for the long promised Messiah.

Of course, they weren't the only people in Israel who were waiting. In some ways the whole Jewish nation was waiting. The last prophets had been hundreds of years before. They had brought prophecies of a coming Messiah who would restore the fortunes of Israel; who would bring (as we read in the reading from Luke's gospel) the consolation of Israel and redemption of Jerusalem – in other words they were waiting for God to act in a decisive and visible way, waiting to see the long promised Messiah who would, they hoped and assumed, bring freedom from the Roman oppression. Yes, they were waiting in one sense, but it all made little difference to how they lived now. The hope of the Messiah was perhaps as we often think of hope today – something that would be nice if it happened, but that we can't be certain about and that it's not worth spending too much time thinking about or worrying about.

But for Simeon and Anna the waiting became the whole purpose of their lives.

Simeon was, we read, a devout man. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would see God act – see the long promised Messiah -

before he died. And that same Spirit led him to the temple on the day when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus in. We can imagine a man of prayer, in tune with God, able to listen and hear the words of God. Someone for whom the waiting time was a time of devotion and prayer and listening to God, but primarily a time filled with hope for what he was certain would happen.

Anna, we read, was constantly in the temple, worshipping and praying. She too was listening to God and ready to act on what he told her. She was, like Simeon, hoping and praying and waiting for God to act. She was waiting with God, for God to act.

And hope for both of them was the kind of hope that Paul and others talk about in the Bible. Certain hope. We hope for something knowing that it will happen – knowing that there can be no doubt – but the timing is God's timing. For Simeon and Anna, their calling was to wait for God to act – It wasn't an if but a when.

We all too often see waiting time as a kind of limbo time – a transition between the past and the future, where the focus of thought and hope is on the future. We wait through the present because we want to live the future.

But that wasn't the case for Simeon. He had waited. Day by day he had waited. Waited and prayed and listened. And now he heard God speak. The waiting period was coming to an end. This baby before him was the one; the one who would grow up to be the Messiah, the Saviour, the hope and consolation of Israel. The long awaited Messiah.

But he knew it wasn't in his gift to be part of the Messiah's mission. His wait wasn't a wait to be involved, but a wait to see it begin. He would never live in the future for which he had been hoping for such a long time. He knew that his part in all this was waiting; was praying; was longing. And once the waiting was over, his part in the plan would be over too. Simeon's purpose was in the waiting. And I think its fair to assume that the same was true for Anna.

It reminds me of Moses. Leading the nation of Israel through the wilderness wanderings for 40 years; hoping for the promised land; certain that God would lead them there and establish them there, but knowing it was not in his gift to enjoy living in the land – just to glimpse it and see the beginnings of the promise being fulfilled.

Sometimes the waiting time can be a long time. For Moses 40 years; for Simeon and Anna many years (we don't know how many); for the nation maybe 400 years. And when it becomes a long time, perhaps its all too easy to slip into the 'it will never happen' mindset; for the hope to lose its certainty and become just a vague possibility – and probably one that will never happen; for the waiting to become futile. Hope then needs to be certain hope and to be held on to; the promises of God need to be written firmly on hearts and the waiting time needs to become about more active listening and praying.

So what are we hoping for; what are we waiting for? Here in Shirley Parish? What are we waiting for God to do here?

For me, I am looking forward in hope that the churches here will grow – both in numbers, and in our own faith. I am hoping that new people will join us, that each of us will continue to journey onwards with God. I am hoping for a renewed and revitalised church; a church fulfilling its mission to reach out to the people of Shirley and show God's love; a church that will grow and will develop and will thrive.

And as we know waiting times are not easy; perhaps we get frustrated because nothing or little seems to be happening.

But here in Shirley I look forward and I wait in hope. And I believe that hope will not disappoint us.

Meanwhile this waiting time is not going to be wasted time. I – and I trust you as well – will do all I can to help bring about what God wants to do here.

Today is the feast of Candlemas or the Presentation of Christ which is why we remember Simeon and Anna.

We recall that Simeon spoke the words we have come to know as the Nunc Dimittis

*Master, now you are dismissing your servant^[h] in peace,
according to your word;*

³⁰ *for my eyes have seen your salvation,*

³¹ *which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

³² *a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'*

He talked of this Jesus, this baby, this Messiah as a light. A light who would reveal the truth about God to all people.

Jesus himself as he grew described himself as the light of the world, and spoke of us, his followers, being lights as well. He urged us to let our lights shine.

And today – symbolically – we are going to do that. To take our lighted candles out into the world. To where we go, to what we do in our daily lives.

To live out the hope we have as we wait for God to do the thing he wants to do in Shirley.

For Simeon the waiting was over, for us we are still part of that wait. But, as we have thought, God does not call us not to wait passively but to be active; to trust in him and to shine out for him, and to act for him.

So together, as we take lighted candles into the world – into our Monday to Saturday worlds – lets commit ourselves not just to waiting for God to act, but to bringing that action to be by living out our faith.