

In the name of the father...

How do we mark the passing of time? I suspect that each of us will have our own traditions for how we do this. In one family I lived with for a while, on every birthday everyone in the household would sit around together and share a story or a favourite memory of the person whose birthday it was – it was quite amazing. On Friday one of the My Move mum's told me a story she had heard once on QI of a great aunt who would pronounce loudly each morning as a bowl of porridge was placed before her 'Ah – breakfast again!'

The liturgical year of the church is designed to mark the passing of time, and draw us at the same time to ponder the depths of our faith and ask familiar questions which might allow us to move forward in our believing and understanding.

Today we come to the end of the season of Christmas and Epiphany. We began this journey in November with the season of Advent – a season of longing for the coming of Christ. At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation (the real presence) of God made human in the world, and throughout Epiphany we explore and acknowledge that Jesus is both human and divine. Then today in our procession and prayers, we turn from the incarnation at Christmas towards the story of the passion at Easter.

In the Gospel of Luke, the parents of Jesus respond to his birth by attending to the obligations called for in Leviticus 12:3-8. These ancestral traditions are a reminder to them that Jesus is born in the context of the covenant established between God and the people Israel. The language of purification may sound odd to us, but it arises from sensitivity to the holy. Mary and Joseph, as good Jewish parents, when they bring Jesus to be presented to the temple. It is not unlike the tradition of 'churching' then baptism which was the tradition in many parts of Britain even up until recently (and still takes place in some communities). A routine event for a young faithful family – to give thanks to God for their child: the marking of time.

But as this young family come to mark this birth – something unusual happens – there are others who are looking for signs that the world is turning and time is moving on. Not just in the traditions of acknowledging the birth of a child, but in hope for a change in life on earth. As we started to explore in Matthew's writings last week – the community into which Jesus was born is looking for an end to Roman imperialism and for justice. They want to be a free people, and they no longer want to be oppressed. I suspect many of us can think of examples of communities, nations and even individuals, who, for a whole myriad of reasons have that longing and hope today.

So it is against this backdrop – the prayer of many people for God to come and change the world that Mary and Joseph are met by Simeon – a faithful disciple of God, who longs for Israel to be liberated.

Simeon was a devout man we are told – one faithful to God – and a man who listens to the voice of God. Simeon yearned for things to change – I suspect in a way that

only an old man can- A man who had seen the journey of his people throughout a lifetime and knew that pain and joys that it entailed. He had been guided by the spirit to understand that he would not die until his yearning had been fulfilled and the messiah would arrive.

It is a very powerful and emotive image – an old man –longing for the freedom his people – with the smell of his mortality surrounding him- holds onto his knowledge that he will not die until the liberator arrives. And so Simeon having seen Jesus speaks:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

May we all be granted such a statement of peace before our deaths – that we might proclaim the yearnings of the spirit within us has been fulfilled!

Simeon is not alone however as someone waiting for the promise of change, for in the account of Jesus presentation we also meet Anna. Note that it is Anna, not Simeon, who is recorded as the prophet. We know this because of the dedication of her life – she fasts and prays. A pattern we see in the description of the prophets throughout all history. But also because others see her as a prophet. We still use these three markers today in confirming the call of a person to be a sole servant of God. We ask them to demonstrate their dedication to prayer and spiritual disciplines – and we ask the community to confirm that they believe God has bestowed upon them this gift. So it is the authority of Anna as a prophet – a spiritual and faithful servant of God who also proclaims that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

This image of the Jesus presentation in the temple is the image of humanity longing for God, but also an image of God longing for us to recognise and respond to his immense love. While for Anna and Simeon their praying and longing is fulfilled in the arrival of the Christ Child, for us we both live with the joy that God is with us, but long for all to know Christ, and ultimately -we long for the coming of the Kingdom of God here on earth. We like Simeon and Anna in many ways are a people longing for the liberation of the world, and liberation which will bring justice for all people. But how do we live with this tension of having the light, and longing for the light of God?

For three days this past week I had the most wonderful opportunity. I tutor a small group of Priests in training. Every three years all the trainee priests in London have a 3 day residential – and in this co-hort we met this week. It really is a gift to be able to take 3 days out of routine to focus on our spiritual lives, and our formation as priests. It was a great three days for lots of reasons – partly because I had dedicated time to sit and listen to how my trainee’s are doing; but also because of the wonderful input we had during our time away. One of the parts of the program was Jane Williams speaking about praying through the psalms for an hour each day. She

is a very gifted speaker and one of my colleagues described her sessions as 'a massage for the soul'. It was a good description. (Jane is speaking at St Paul's later in the year – so look out for a chance to listen to her) But there was also something in these sessions which reminded me of the example of Anna, and how as Christians we mark the passing of time.

Jane reminded us that the psalms are not easy – but they are a pattern of prayer and meditation for our faith daily, in the face of oppression and fear. They are the prayers of the faithful throughout time and space. And as such they are a resonance of our yearning, our hopes for liberations, our desire for peace – and our longing for God. This is the pattern that Anna also observed. The daily prayer, the minute by minute yearning and longing and praying before God. And in this context it is prayer, and the related relationship with God which marks the passing of time.

There is so much we cannot control or even sometime influence in our world. But we can pray, and we can also live in the integrity of that prayer in our own lives which we hope not only effects the way we live, but how others might live also.

At its heart, Candlemas is a festival of light. A desire to mark the passing of time in prayer and in recognition of God's light in the world amidst all the fear and trouble which might lay before us.

And it is today as we walk with our candles in this place we long for the light of God to fall upon us all. And we pray that in the year that follows justice will be found, all will be safe. It is not a platitude – it should be our solemn prayer:

Our God, we cry out to you
may we bring light to your world
may we be faithful to you
from this time forth and forever more. Amen