

What do we long for?

During the week I was chatting to several people who were longing for today – the 31st January, and the promise that it will be light until 5pm. After such a difficult winter of being locked inside as well as rain, the promise that the days are getting longer really is something!

But what of our life - what do we look for which would allow us at the end of our lives to utter words like those we hear spoken by Simeon and Anna today – that they are able to rest in peace because they have seen their hope fulfilled!

As Christians when we read the Old Testament we hear the words of the prophets as words of promise that a messiah will come. The community into which Jesus was born was one that longed for an end to their oppression – they looked to a time when their community would be liberated.

At present, we long for an end to the pandemic because it is foremost in our mind, but we long for greater things than this as a generation - for an end to environmental destruction; for an end to wars, to poverty, to racism and inequality.

If we want to understand the weight of the readings we hear today, imagine we have today witnessed the arrival of the promise that will end all these things.

Simeon was a devout man we are told – one faithful to God – and a man who listens for the voice of God. Simeon yearned for things to change – throughout his lifetime he witnessed the journey of his people- 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 then there is Anna who has also yearned for liberation, she longs for this so much that she never leaves the temple as she lives in constant prayer!

I love this image – the elders of a community –yearning for the freedom of their people – fully aware of their mortality – still holding onto the belief that the liberator will arrive. With this image in mind we see Simeon drawn to the temple, to the 40 day old Jesus – and to lift this small baby in his arms and to proclaim

“Now, Lord, let your servant go in peace: for your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen your salvation– a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Every time I hear these words - the words of the Nunc Dimittis- I wonder!
I wonder what would allow me to utter such words.

And yet, this image of the Jesus presentation in the temple is the image of humanity longing for God, but it also is an image of God longing for us to recognise and respond to his immense love.

Anna and Simeon's longing is fulfilled in the arrival of the Christ Child.

And the same is true for us as well.

All that we long for has already been made possible - and it is yearning for this fulfilment that draws us together to worship and pray every week, every day, every minute.

It is yearning that draws us to Christ - a yearning to respond to God's love within and around us.

Candlemas marks the turn from the celebration of Christ incarnation - God coming amongst - and to facing the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection. It is grounded in the foundations of our faith - and in the place we live - whatever challenges we might face.

Our faith is held in this space which recognises the reality that **God is with us** AND the reality of humanities brokenness which leads to Jesus death and the hope of the resurrection which is realised at the end of his passion.

Our faith is held both in our longing, like Simeon and Anna, for all that is possible in God; and the reality that we so often rebel against living in a way that would bring the peace and justice and hope we are yearning for.

In the image of Jesus being lifted up by Simeon we have an image of hope - the past - those who longed for a messiah, those who longed for a more intimate experience of God, who longed for a different experience of humanity where justice and hope might reign. And the future - the child Jesus both human and divine, a helpless infant and yet the source of all hope and expectation that things would change.

It is a startling image, and one that many say is folly. But we believe it has potential - that God is giving us a sign and a space - not just for hope but for action! Sometimes we may feel that we hiding in the space between God and reality; but actually we are living in a space where God is our reality and your longing is met.

The prophet Malachi from whom we heard the first reading today, understands the patience and endurance which faith requires. Little is known about this prophet, however he is thought to be the last of the 'traditional' prophets before John the Baptist.

This book describes a time of restless waiting in the history of the people of Judah. The exile was over, the second temple had been built and worship there restored, but all was not as it had been envisioned. There was as yet no sign of the glory of God returning to fill the temple. In today's passage the prophet responds with some sobering words. They had expected God's blessing, but it is to come first through purification and pain (A refining fire). Malachi is attempting to help his community see that cleansing and change are possible, but there is a cost involved.

One of the challenges of our modern world is that we expect everything now - we have no sense that things take time that we may not see things come to fruition. If

we doubt this we need only listen to public expectation to produce billions of vials of vaccine in a short period. I think it is one of the reason that so many people struggle with the concept of faith – it is not instant, it takes work – and it is full of mystery and rarely absolute! But I think too sometimes we forget that our faith is where we are now, and it is not a place to hide (though sometimes we might feel like it) – but a place to live.

For God, our lifetimes are but a second – change may take eternity, seasons change but God remains the same. But also in faith, nothing is instant, understanding and change take work and time – a refining fire. Anna and Simeon waited in nearly there entire life time. We often expect God to respond to our prayers before we put Sunday lunch in the oven!

The gift of Candlemas and of the words of the Nunc Dimittis is that they remind us of the space we live in. It reminds us of both our yearnings, but also that God is already fulfilling this promise.

In Malachi and in Luke's gospel we are reminded that when our longing seems like it will not be fulfilled, we come to know that it will change - there is hope for we have faith in God! So often we look for signs in strange places; but mostly they come to us like Simeon and Anna – just to the place where we are

Now, Lord, let your servant go in peace: for your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen your promise fulfilled.

May this be our prayer too – that we too may see in our lifetime evidence of God's promised fulfilled in the stories that we tell and in the way that we live. **Amen**