

Ezekiel 43: 27 - 44:4, 1 Corinthians 13, Luke 2: 22 - 40

‘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, as it is written in the law of the Lord...’

I’d rather skip over the sacrificing birds bit except, of course, that it fixes Jesus firmly in the tradition of his faith. The first-born male was dedicated to the Lord and the power and symbolism of that was proclaimed by the shedding of blood. This child though, who had be born of the will of God and was about to have even more prophecies spoken over him, and who would change the course of history, had to follow the course of law - ‘as it is written in the law of the Lord’.

Mary has done her waiting - nine long months of it, and prophecies and messengers, anticipation and anxious waiting had all given way to ‘living with the baby’.

Joseph, too, has done his share of waiting - prophecies and dreams, confusion and not understanding, have given way to caring for two instead of one and coming to terms with the reality of what all the dreams meant.

It is so easy to get caught up in the daily minutiae of life that we lose track of the deeper, underlying meanings. We, too, put aside the bigger picture and the questions of life, to cope with the nitty-gritty of each day.

Jesus’ start in life was really no different from that of any child and, like many an infant, he and his needs were the centre of the universe to Mary and Joseph. The centre of the universe as they saw it and as God saw it, of course, were somewhat different.

And Jesus? Well, he doesn’t know anything beyond crying for what his body tells him he wants and needs. His long waiting has only just begun.

Simeon and Anna, you will not be surprised to hear, are two people I have in mind, though. ‘There was a man in Jerusalem’...who was ‘righteous and devout’. I think Simeon was simply that, a righteous and devout man, ‘looking forward to the consolation of Israel’, that is, looking forward to the coming of the Messiah; not a priest or a Pharisee. He didn’t perform the

rites for Mary and the babe, he was just there, guided by the Spirit to come into the Temple. And that says a great deal.

To have been guided by the Spirit to go into the Temple, or to do anything, he must have been listening, have been waiting on the Spirit. His waiting and prayer for the coming of the Messiah must have been the same as many people's over the centuries of the Jewish faith. Many had waited and many had died still waiting. Here we have a man who waited with faith and hope and, most importantly, **recognised the moment**. Drawn to the Temple, drawn to he did not know what, he saw this baby, among perhaps many others brought into the Temple that day for the rites of Purification, and knew that this was why he had been led there, perhaps even why he had been born. This was what he had waited for all his life. This was what the people of Israel had waited for, for so many centuries. All history, his own and his people's, was brought to this one point in time and space, in a tiny baby - and he recognised it, he knew it. It was his waiting on the Spirit which gave him the greatest gift of his life and he realised there was nothing greater that could happen to him. The waiting gave him the power of recognition.

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

But that wasn't the end of it. Part of the waiting was an awareness, in deep compassion, for what the nature of this child would mean for his mother, as well as for the nation - "and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was no doubt to Simeon that this baby, this Jesus, could not go unnoticed through life. His was a light which could not be hidden. His very presence would reveal what people wanted to keep secret - 'the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.' But the issues of religion and nation were not the whole understanding of Simeon. Before him was a young woman, a new mother, with hopes and fears and dreams for her child. In the compassion given him by the Spirit, he had to speak to her.

They were not comfortable words, but true ones. God's words to us are not always comfortable, in terms of being easy to hear and gentle. The way Simeon used them, they were comfortable in the old meaning of 'comfort' - with strength. He spoke words of prophecy to Mary, no less than to his nation, with the power of God behind him, the real 'comfort'. Behind this child, therefore behind Mary, is the full strength and support of God.

Then there is Anna. She was a widow which, as we know, in those days meant she was on the edge of society. Yet here we have this elderly woman, out-cast to a degree, stepping forward with the word of God. Like Simeon, her life was one of constantly waiting on God. No-one wanted her, except God, and her years of patient waiting and devotion were being rewarded in a way she would never have imagined. Anna worshipped in the Temple, 'with fasting and prayer night and day', possibly not waiting consciously for any one thing, just being in the presence of God. Because sometimes our waiting has simply to be waiting on God, on the Spirit, for no other reason than that that is what is asked of us.

Like Simeon, Anna recognised the moment, because her waiting made her open to the movement of the Spirit within and around her. An ordinary, but God-centred woman given the gift of physical sight of the Messiah and given inner sight too. She could no longer be silent, as would have been expected of an elderly widow - like children, to be seen but not heard. She went out from that encounter with the child, proclaiming the presence of the Messiah to all who were waiting for the Day of the Lord. Probably she spoke to everyone, as we do when we have something important to say. Some people would hear it and rejoice with her, others would be sceptical, and to others this would just be the ravings of a religious fanatic. The Spirit called on her, though, to step beyond the expected, to be brave and not fear what she had to say. She was called to carry on waiting on the Lord, for only there was life, for her and everyone else.

It's all about waiting, whether we know what we are waiting for or not. It's about our inner space being a God-space.

It's about a focus in our lives that is within and beyond the daily trivia, and even beyond the things we think are important in our lives.

It's about acknowledging that neither I, nor any other person, knows what life is really all about. Only God knows that, hence the deep need to wait on God, listening and watching for his prompting and guidance.

It's good to have had 1 Corinthians 13 as one of today's readings because it places the Gospel reading exactly where it should be. The prophecies of Ezekiel, and many other prophets before and after him, came to an end. What they spoke of was fulfilled and their tongues of ecstasy ceased. So many of their words fell on deaf ears as people rushed around concentrating on the daily, the nitty-gritty, as has been for all time and still is.

Yet here, in this tiny bundle was the beginning of the world being shown the love that never ends. All the hopes and dreams and visions we might have or dream of having are worth absolutely nothing, Paul declares, compared with the gift of love, the gift of God's love, the gift of God incarnate.