

Wow – Every author wants to get the readers’ attention. We mark the end of the church’s Christmas season with the climax of Luke’s wonderful collection of stories around Jesus birth. as Michael said at Christmas - a wonderful golden world of angels and mystic messengers.

Today we hear of Anna and Simeon, Anna the elderly prophet who spent all her time in the temple. Michael speaks of Anna in this week’s video in the newsletter. I’m going to focus on Simeon. I have to confess I had an unorthodox thought as I read Luke’s account. Traditionally paintings show Simeon as an old man but there is no mention of his age in the story. What we are told is that he is spiritually sensitive and he knows that he will see the Messiah in his lifetime. But leaving his age aside let’s move forward. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. An intriguing phrase. In what way did Israel need consoling?

Politically - Israel had a long history of being oppressed and at the time of Jesus the Jews were not masters of their own destiny. They were a subject people in an occupied land.

Spiritually – Israel is a bit adrift. The first temple, Solomon’s temple, was filled with the glory of God. That had been destroyed by the Babylonian invasion. Israel built a second temple but it was different. Malachi tells us in the chapters before today’s reading that the priesthood was forgetful of its duties and the Temple was underfunded because the people have lost interest in it.

Morally - labourers were being defrauded of their wages, and the widows, fatherless and aliens were oppressed.

But in such a difficult time Simeon lives with the hope and expectation expressed in our first reading. “The Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple.” Like a refiner’s fire he will purify the temple and its priests and make things right again.

Simeon sees that God’s story is bigger than his story, bigger than Israel’s story. He knows that Israel’s paradigm –her framework of beliefs, concepts and behaviour – her paradigm has become so tattered, so full of holes that a complete change is the only way forward. He trusts that God will reveal his Messiah in his own lifetime. This will be something apocalyptic in the sense of an unveiling. In that new light people will see completely differently. And this is not only for Israel but for everyone.

I love the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon's song that we heard as a gradual this morning. Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace – for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. I have sung it for over 60 years. It expresses such faith and contentment. Each time I hear it sung I wonder how the composer is going to set those final apocalyptic lines - To be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

But what has inspired Simeon to utter these climactic words?

And here is the remarkable thing. He sees an unremarkable couple with a 40 day old baby and he knows that this is the moment. To uninvolved onlookers this was just another baby. The baby hasn't done anything special - and yet Simeon knows that he has seen God's salvation made flesh. Everything is changed. This child is to be a light for unveiling for the gentiles – that apocalypse word is there in the Greek – Light for all the people on earth and the glory of Israel. Glory has returned to the temple.

With an introduction like that you must want to read on. What happens next? How does it end?

Luke gives us a couple of teasers. The first is in those words to Mary "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many and a sword will pierce your own soul too" We who know the story see that Luke is pointing to the cross. The other hint that struck me was in the last sentence of our gospel reading. "The child was filled with wisdom"

We have to ask How does wisdom lead to the cross? The rest of the gospel tells us – wonderful ageless stories of miracles, parables and teaching – As our first hymn puts it Amazing words of wisdom, truth and grace.

and also a recurring theme of taking time out to think. Wisdom is about making right choices. Luke tells us how wisdom leads Jesus to choose the path of self-giving love – and the path of love leads to joy and pain and sacrifice.

That is our calling – as beloved individuals and as a beloved community. To follow Jesus Christ, to grow in wisdom, to be set free, to choose the path of self-giving love and to experience joy and pain and sacrifice.

So here we are at Candlemas, the end of the Christmas season. It's time to finally put away the Christmas decorations, time to turn off the festal outside lights. In the darkness we are called as the body of Christ to grow in wisdom,

to reveal the light of Christ to everyone, to display God's glory, to shine so brightly that we become a living mystery that invites scrutiny.

I'd like to finish with the end of Amanda Gorman's joyful recitation at Joe Biden's inauguration, so full of wisdom and life and laughter.

For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.