

Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7

28.12.14

A Gospel for the year's end

Scene 1: just over 30 years ago; the date, January 6th 1984. The baptism of an infant has taken place and family and friends gather afterwards for food and drink. The child is her parents' firstborn and her grandfather is invited to propose a toast and to say a few words for the occasion. He is in his mid-70s and his life has spanned most of the 20th century, and in his off-the-cuff remarks he looks back on that life and the things he has witnessed: the transformation of the motor car from a novelty to a necessity, the development of aircraft from bi-planes to space-shuttles and even then, back in 1984, the first stirrings of the personal computer revolution. And he wonders what this little infant, his new granddaughter, will see in her life-time. In a world where change accelerates at a bewildering pace, what will she have witnessed when she looks back as he is now doing? What kind of a world will she grow up in? And there is something deeply moving about an elderly person toward the end of their life addressing a new-born infant – something about the continuity of the generations, the mystery of life itself.

Scene 2: the temple in Jerusalem, maybe 4 BC, as a firstborn child is dedicated to God and his mother undergoes the prescribed rituals of purification after childbirth. A stranger is present there, an elderly man whose life is about to be dramatically fulfilled as he is about to witness the one thing that he has dreamed of, the one thing that he has yearned to see, the one thing that will allow him to die in peace.

If he were to look back on his life he too would speak of change but many of his memories would not be happy. It was 60 years since the Roman Emperor Pompeii had intervened into the chaotic morass of Jewish politics by marching into Jerusalem, and since then the population had grown accustomed to life under an occupying power. His memories would therefore include soldiers on street corners, high taxation, the politics of divide and rule, the betterment of those prepared to collude with the enemy, all the petty humiliations of occupation that scarred life and took away people's pride and dignity. How Simeon longed for one who would come and banish such oppression and restore Jerusalem and

Israel to its former glory! And he has felt moved to visit the temple on this day, strange promptings that he can't explain have led him to this place. And he looks upon this child in his mother's arms and he is stirred to reach out and to hold him as words well up from deep within him and pour forth. Here at last is this deliverer. Here at last is salvation and glory for God's people Israel - though he perceives that not all will go well with this child, that he will be a cause of stumbling and falling and that a sword will pierce his mother's soul.

Then as we look more closely we see another figure – an old woman of 84. She has the same memories as Simeon only perhaps she is older. And maybe she remembers the day when Jerusalem and the temple were humbled and defiled with the arrival of the Roman troops, and for all these years she has shared Simeon's dreams and yearnings. She too looks on this child and is prompted to give thanks and to proclaim the good news to all who like her and Simeon are longing for the restoration of Jerusalem. Her past 84 years contain much that is dark and troubled but the next 84 years will be different, she believes. What a contrast there will be when this little baby looks back at the end of his life! Things will have changed! The tragedy of course is that things will not be different at all. Far from witnessing the restoration of Jerusalem the coming years will see its shaming and total destruction – for God's purposes are far wider and deeper than she can possibly anticipate.

As we ponder this passage, then, there is one theme that stands out with particular force and clarity and it's the theme of fulfilment. There is a strong sense of hidden plans now coming to pass, even if they are quite different from what Simeon and Anna assumed. Indeed the theme of fulfilment is pervasive. Firstly there is a sense of the fulfilment of time as things are now taking place at their appointed moment. We read in verse 21, 'After 8 days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child'; and then in verse 22, 'when the time came for their purification according to the law...' (verse 22). In his careful references to these specific timings is not the author hinting at a far greater fulfilment of things long awaited that have finally found their moment that with the arrival of this baby?

Then secondly, there is a sense of the fulfilment of God's Law. Mary and Joseph go up to Jerusalem in submission to the Law of Moses

and its stipulations concerning purification and dedication. But is there not perhaps a whisper of greater fulfilment taking place, just the breath of a rumour that the whole Law of Moses finds its end here and now in this infant?

And thirdly there is a sense here of the fulfilment of the great prophets of Israel's faith. Centuries before a prophet named Joel had looked forward to the day when God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh and young and old would prophesy and see visions and dream dreams and here we find this old man and an old woman moved by the Spirit to prophecy. Here is the fulfilment of ancient prophecies and promises.

And of course there is too the fulfilment of Simeon's life, the taking place of what he has long awaited. Take the opening words of his proclamation, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace...' These words apparently echo the order given to a watchman on lookout that their watch is ended. They can stand down. And in this moment Simeon's eyes behold that for which he has scanned the horizon all his days. And Simeon's life therefore finds fulfilment as he stands down and he is changed from watchman to witness. Not only does he gaze upon what he has longed all his life to set his eyes upon but he also becomes a witness to others, testifying publicly to what God has done. And it's the same with Anna. She not only beheld what God had done but she proclaimed and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. She too becomes a witness. And that is scene 2: a story set in a dark and difficult time, with the future full of fear and foreboding. But Simeon and Anna find the fulfilment of their lives in becoming witnesses to the fulfilment of God's purposes.

That brings us to scene 3: December 28th 2014, the English Reformed Church, Amsterdam. That little child baptised 31 years ago, my daughter, is now a married woman living in Buenos Aires and this is my first Christmas without her which is maybe why my thoughts have turned to her. And if I may speak personally, here am I gathered with the rest of my family for Christmas at the start of a new ministry in a place I never dreamed I would be just one year ago. And at times like this you feel very strongly the weight of the past and the lightness and openness of

the future. And my daughter's grandfather, my father, who spoke those words at her baptism all those years ago has long since died, and the world that he speculated about in his impromptu remarks is not an entirely hopeful place – indeed it is in many ways a more fearful and frightening place than he could possibly have imagined then. It has many resonances with Simeon and Anna's world – dark and threatening and ominous. And what do we say to our children and to one another on this last Sunday of the year? What are we to say to our children and to one another as we anticipate the joys and the tragedies, the sublime peaks and foolish troughs of human affairs in the coming year? Well, let me suggest, briefly, three things that need to be said that are gleaned from our passage.

Firstly, we must speak with Simeon of the fulfilment that took place centuries ago when Christ came. The hopes and longings and yearnings of the ages came true then as this crucial part of God's plan for the whole universe took place then. No matter how dark and threatening the future this thing has happened, the Christ has come and this cannot be undone. And our lives and our world are therefore grounded in what has already taken place one and for all, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In this sense we are anchored in the past. As the great theologian P.T. Forsyth, former minister of my church in Cambridge put it, 'the world's greatest need is less than Christ's great victory'. In other words in the task of saving the world, in the task of bringing justice and peace and rescuing creation from human abuse and folly a turning-point has already occurred and what needs to be done is less than what has already been accomplished! And as Christians we live with that conviction and in that hope, grounded as we are in the fulfilment of God's purposes in Christ.

And secondly, to my daughter who was baptised that day 31 years ago I would say, that was the most important day of your life. That was the day when God breathed His Spirit into your heart and adopted you as a child of God, and not merely a child but an heir of all God's promises. And nothing can ever take that away from you. And the same is true for all the baptised, adults and children alike. In all the ups and downs and uncertainties and unknowns of life that much is safe and complete, fulfilled and unassailable. And the true fulfilment of our lives consists therefore not in wealth or celebrity or success or status or consumption

but in this gift that comes to us as sheer grace: the gift of adoption as children of God.

But thirdly, our lives are further fulfilled when, like Simeon and Anna, we become witnesses to Christ, when our lives bear testimony to him. That was Simeon and Anna's true fulfilment. As they looked back over troubled years and as they looked forward to a future that was to prove dark and troubled, they bore witness to the Christ child. That was their chief end and so too is it ours.

Who knows what the future holds? Who knows what kind of world our children will inherit? Will it be the world of restoration that Simeon and Anna hoped for? Will it be the world of stumbling and falling that Simeon also foresaw, a world where swords pierce parents' souls? Who knows? But at the end of one year and the beginning of another we proclaim with Simeon and Anna the good news that the Christ has come. Our task, like them, is simply to bear witness. And therein lies the fulfilment of our lives. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
Eternal Lord and Ancient of days,
Maker and giver of time,
we praise you for your faithfulness

to us throughout all our days,
for your accompanying of us through
the minutes and the hours and the days,
the months and the years of our lives.
And we praise you for the blessing
with which you fill our moments,
for the delights of love and friendship,
for the joys and pleasures of the senses,
and for those moments of fulfilment
when we know that it is for this that we have been made.
Yet, God our lives are also full of regrets,
regrets at opportunities wasted,
remorse for gifts spurned,
sorrow at relationships neglected or wounded.
O God forgive us for all that is wrong in us.
Forgive us for all that falls short of your great
hopes and longings for us.
Assure us, we pray, of your grace.
Give us time to emend our lives
and to allow them to be remade by your
loving and patient touch.
We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ
our Saviour and Lord, in whose name and in whose words
we pray, saying...

O saving God,
In coming to us in Jesus you have affirmed your
commitment to this world that you love;

you have demonstrated your faithfulness
to your creation
and your desire for each of us to have
fullness of life...

We pray today for those whose lives are unfulfilled -
due to lack of opportunity, or lack of education,
or lack of resources, or lack of love.

And we pray for those with responsibility
for shaping our world into a fairer place
where there is fullness of life for all.

We pray for our world leaders and for politicians,
for those with influence through the media,
for those who have the power to shape public opinion
and to foster attitudes and prejudice.

O God lead them in ways that are true and right
and that honour and dignify human beings...

And bless those who minister your Word –
who, like Simeon and Anna, prophecy
and give insight into your plans and purposes.
Equip them, we pray, with your Holy Spirit...

And as Simeon held the baby Jesus and blessed him
so we pray for all children in our midst,
especially those here in our church family.
May they be nurtured in your truth
and shaped and formed by the community of the Spirit,
and so may they grow to be witnesses to you
And find fulfilment in their lives.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name and
to the glory of God. Amen.