

We're going to read some scripture together, so very well-known words:

[Reading Luke 2:1-7]

We're going to look at some verses a little bit further on in Luke chapter 2, and I just want to speak briefly about those. Luke 2:22-38 say this:

[Reading Luke 2:22-38]

So in those words we have various responses:

We have Mary and Joseph's very traditional response. Their actions show that they were God-fearing parents who wanted to do the right thing for their son. When they brought the child to the priest for circumcision and dedication they exactly followed all the instructions given in the Law of Moses. In this ceremony of dedication, which is very similar to what we do in dedication: we are giving the child back to God, and in fact in the Jewish understanding they were symbolically redeeming, in other words they were buying back the life of their first-born. You may remember in the Exodus story the first-born of the Israelite families had been saved by the sprinkling of blood around the door posts – that's what saved, the Exodus story tells us, the first-born of the Israelite families. So in this sense, as they brought their first-born child, they were redeeming, they buying back, his life. It's notable as well that Mary and Joseph were poor. How poor they were is illustrated by the sacrifice they chose to make: the giving of two small doves or two pigeons was a special allowance for the poor to give; usually you'd sacrifice of lamb, but if you couldn't afford that you have this allowance to sacrifice doves or pigeons.

The child also received his name at this ceremony, and the name Jesus actually means “Saviour”. But actually it was a common name, or a fairly common name, at the time and there is another person that we read of, the name is Bar-Jesus, and “Bar” means “Son of”. So actually there was somebody who was also quite unrelated to Jesus who was called Bar-Jesus, “Son of Jesus”. So the name Jesus wasn't an unusual name at the time. But, of course, this name was fulfilled in Jesus' life in a unique way.

So we have Mary and Joseph's traditional response to what they were told.

Then we have Anna's prophetic response. I'm not actually going to refer to Simeon this morning even though we read all that he had to say, and we can have another sermon just looking at what's said. Imagine being told (I've just said I'm not going to talk about him but for a moment). Imagine being told by Simeon: “Mary, a sword will pierce your heart.” To be told that as a child is born.

Anna's prophetic response: we know very little about Anna, we do know she was a widow but had not allowed her difficult circumstances to make her depressed, or bitter, because we realise, we told rather, that day and night she worshipped! She worshipped God, she fasted and she prayed. She was a devout woman. She'd lost her husband early on after just 7 years marriage, but then had spent the rest of her Life giving herself over to prayer, to God. It's interesting that in Jewish history by this stage there had been no prophets in Israel for 400 years – no prophets! The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees tried to explain why this was, but to be honest they couldn't get to the bottom of it: “Why it seems though God has left his people, why are there no prophets

speaking to us, telling us God's word and God's will?" And yet here, this is God breaking his silence but doing so through an elderly woman.

Now women back in Jewish Society they had very little status: a woman couldn't give evidence in court because her word was of no value. The only thing of less value than a Woman was an elderly woman – she really was the bottom of the heap. But God chose to speak through her. Interestingly we don't have her words reported – we have Simeon's words in quite a lot of detail – we don't know the words that Anna spoke, but we do know some of their meaning; we have it paraphrased for us in these verses. So Anna had spent decades waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (remember we looked at what “redeem” meant earlier on: “buying back”). So here she was praying for the redemption of Jerusalem, God buying back the lives of those who were his own. That was the sense that the Jewish people had, what Redemption meant for them.

When Anna saw Jesus – remember she had this prophetic gift – she immediately knew he was significant. So immediately she saw him she praise God for answered prayer. She had waited effectively her whole life for the Messiah to come and now in her 84th year her faith was finally being rewarded.

Anna's prophetic response is a challenge to each one of us.

What about our own personal response?

As we give and receive gifts (of course they are they are tokens of our love and our friendship, as we give gifts, but as we do so) we are reminded to think about our attitudes towards other people. Well similarly as we think about God's gift of Jesus to us, we can reflect on how we respond to him. He came to get us not a life of drudgery or boredom or hopelessness, but we are told in John Chapter 10 he came to give us a life in all its fullness – but to do that even within the mundane and the ordinary of our lives!

You see that God can take the ordinary and make it special, he can take the ordinary and turn it into little jewels of beauty. And in fact that's what life's about: if we're looking for life to be constantly exciting – I don't know about you but sometimes when I'm on (what have I got into...) Instagram; on Instagram you can pull up what are called “Reels” and they're little sort of like snippets of like a video, and some of the ones I get are of these extreme sports people who will do all sorts of crazy things: you know there's one guy he's on a motorbike and he's on a ski slope and so he goes down a ski slope on his motorbike and then he flips over 3 times and I thought to myself I hope he's not hoping to land on that motorbike afterwards but he doesn't. He then has a parachute attached himself and a separate parachute attached the motorbike, wisely otherwise it could have gone terribly wrong. Why you want to do that I don't understand, but for me life is not about trying to get things to be as exciting as they can be because in the end you're never going to make life exciting enough to be fulfilling in that way, you have to find the jewels in the ordinary.

We who put our faith and our hope in the same loving God experienced by Mary, Joseph and Anna, and Simeon, we're invited to respond to Jesus with more than an affectionate nod at Christmas time. Rather we're invited to open our lives, even the difficult painful parts of our lives, to the Christ child who became the man Jesus, who died to bring out healing and restoration. And we do that this Christmas time, and on into whatever 2022 should bring us.

Amen