

About forty years ago, I was kneeling on the chancel step, in another church. I wasn't praying or meditating, I was surrounded by the church brass and the stuff to clean it with. It was quite simply, my turn to do the brass.

I was rubbing away, thinking of a million other things, when quite suddenly the words, 'You'll be one of the first women priests', flashed into my head. I remember thinking, 'What a stupid thought, who on earth would want to be one of those'? My vicar was having a very tough time, trying to drag his congregation into the 20th century. Also, priest wasn't a term, I was familiar with, I'd always had vicars.

Having dismissed that thought, I completely forgot about it. However, you'll have to take my word for that. The thought came back to me, after I'd felt God's call to ordination. And two years after my ordination as a deacon, I became one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood. The Bristol diocese went first and Oxford was second. How amazing was that. But I'd known for sure, that women would be ordained as priests in my lifetime.

In the same way, through the Holy Spirit, Simeon knew that he wouldn't see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ. One day, he was guided by the Spirit to visit the Temple and, although there were probably many couples in the Temple that day, all offering their first born sons to the Lord, for consecration, Simeon would probably have recognised Jesus immediately, and taking him in his arms, Simeon spoke the words which we know as the 'Nunc Dimittis'.

I'm sorry but I have to use the traditional words here, they're ingrained in me.

Lord, now lettest thou, thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

A very elderly lady was also there, as she always was, for we're told she never left the temple, day or night. Anna was another prayerful soul, like Simeon, who was waiting for the Messiah. Luke tells us that she was well acquainted with grief. She had been widowed after seven years of marriage and was now 84.

They lived in troubled times. The pain of the community was on their minds, as well as everyone else's. The tax decree, which had forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem, when she was in the last stages of pregnancy, was only the latest episode, in a long history of oppression. For six centuries, one empire after another had dominated all the people of Palestine, to the ends of the known world. Currently, it was the Romans. In every generation, one empire or another was extracting money and resources, from the people it had conquered.

Simeon and Anna would have heard the promises told by the prophet Isaiah, many times. God's promise that a son would be born to a virgin and he was to be called Immanuel and Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. They would have known by heart, the story of how the Babylonians had reduced Jerusalem to ashes and marched their ancestors into captivity in Babylon. And they would know that many years later, God kept his promise, and brought a remnant of the people home, and enabled them to rebuild Jerusalem and their lives.

God kept his promise then and Simeon and Anna were waiting for God to keep his promise now. His promise to send his anointed one, who would bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim freedom to the captive and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. They would be praying for one who would comfort those who mourn, bless with gladness and incite praise instead of despair. Praying, Lord send us your anointed.

You can imagine their joy, when they saw the infant Jesus. Simeon ready to face death and Anna happily sharing the good news with anyone who would listen. How amazing was that? It would be another thirty years before Jesus stood in the temple and read from Isaiah. 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set people free from oppression and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Thirty years until he would say, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing', and began his journey to the cross.

Thirty three years later, it would only be Mary (as far as we know) of those who recognised the Messiah in that tiny baby, only Mary, who would be at the foot of the cross and at the birth of the Church. But it was enough for Simeon and Anna, just to see the dawn of the new thing God was doing, to be comforted by seeing the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise and to touch salvation in its infant form.

What Simeon held in his arms and what Simeon and Anna both saw, with their eyes, was a beautiful bud, containing a beautiful promise. One day it would be in full bloom but for now, a small glimpse of the promised future was enough for them. However, we need to remember that Simeon also warned Mary, that the future would not be plain sailing and that her Son would face challenges and that a sword would pierce her own heart, also.

The culture around us would have had big plans for celebrating this Christmas. Much effort and money will have gone into having a bright and beautiful Christmas. Masses of presents, masses of food and masses of decorations. An artificial floral bonanza.

But for many, this will have been a bud sized Christmas. All they could manage perhaps, through tears of grief, or pain or hunger or loneliness, but hopefully, it would have been enough. Simeon and Anna have perhaps, shown us how to wait in prayerful expectation, through all the struggles of life.

Come O come Emmanuel should be very much our prayer. Come Lord Jesus, preach good news to the poor and the unemployed and all who struggle in any way. Preach release to the captives and all who are oppressed. Preach recovery of sight to the blind, recovery of vision, where vision has died. Come Lord Jesus, bind up the broken-hearted, comfort those who mourn, turn despair into praise. Enter the hearts of people everywhere and bring peace into our troubled world. Let the bud bloom into a flower.

Until our tears have been wiped away and we ourselves can see more clearly, until we hold the tiny bud of promise in our hands and watch it begin to open, until we recognise the good news in this tiny infant form and take him in our arms and hold him close. Until then, and only then, will we too, be able to say, with Simeon, 'Our eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'.

For that, thanks be to God. Amen.