

ANNA – REFLECTION ON A WOMAN OF GRACE

Let's not call this a sermon, but rather a brief reflection on a character often overlooked but who Luke clearly mentions in his Gospel for a purpose, the elderly Anna. I believe she is a great example to us on a service devoted to prayer.

Here is the reading from Luke 2:36-38: "There was also a prophetess, **Anna**, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Wayne introduced the scene on the 21st, when Jesus was presented as a baby in the temple. As it is written: "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Jesus in other words was to be devoted to God, like Samuel while the sacrifice was a Jewish ritual of the time to remove the uncleanness from the blood at the time of the birth.

Wayne told us largely about Simeon – who also came up in the Christmas play – who was an old man, waiting to see the Messiah before he died. And God did honour this promise, leading Simeon to sing the beautiful "Nunc Dimittis" as a valedictory "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my 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."

But the story doesn't end there. As we heard, Mary and Joseph also encounter Anna, a devout, elderly woman who is Luke's counterpart to the man Simeon. Her name means "Grace". What do we learn about her in these brief lines? First, she was a prophetess, who receives revelation of the mind and will of God and declares to others what she has received. She is inspired by God to foretell the future and interpret the present. She didn't need anyone to tell her that this was the Messiah she saw in the arms of Mary and Joseph, God informed her directly.

Second, she was probably very poor, as were widows in Jesus' day – and she had clearly been widowed a very long time. Third, she was extremely devout – she worshipped night and day, fasted and prayed. She was always in the temple, perhaps living in a room there or at least rarely going home. And, unlike Simeon, her response to seeing Jesus was not to assume contentedly that her life was over, rather she immediately started to witness to those visiting the temple that Jesus would redeem and liberate Jerusalem.

I think Anna has lessons that we can reflect on during the remainder of our Christmas and New Year break. It is clear to me that it was Anna's devotion to God, being in constant prayer and worship, that awoke spiritual gifts in her, of prophecy and of evangelism. She was clearly well on the road of sanctification, where her thoughts and actions were increasingly aligned with God's. And this path is open to us too, to the extent that we are willing to sacrifice our time to seeking intimacy with God, as Anna had done for so many years. While we all have obligations, to work and family that cannot and should not be neglected, do they really monopolise all our free time? How would PBC be if more of us,

like Anna, were regularly – if not constantly - in God's house, worshipping, praying and fasting?

Let me just add that Anna is just one of many devout women in Luke's Gospel and indeed in Acts as well. Their importance to the story of salvation is an antidote to the sentiment prevailing in many churches today for women to be downgraded and excluded from leadership. Especially since prominence for women was so counter cultural in Jesus' time, I believe it has a radical message of equality in God's service, that many churches fail to understand. We can be proud as Baptists that women have been permitted in ministry since the 1920s.

Second, Anna was poor. At Christmas time we need to remember the poor in our giving, especially as the economic times are so harsh. But beyond that, we should note how God honours the poor in the person of Anna, but also Simeon, Mary and Elizabeth. Like them she was an obscure, seemingly unimportant person, but God exalted her above all the proud priests and scribes who worked in the temple.

When we are well off – and yes we are most of us well off in world and even UK terms - there is a temptation to look down on the poor as being less than fully human, as objects of pity and not people in themselves. But in the words of Mary's Magnificat, "[God's] mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." So let us not be proud in our wealth, when we consider the poor both in the UK and the developing countries. Let us rather emulate their humility, which God honours. And let us render to them the assistance they need, bearing in mind as it says in Proverbs "whoever is kind to the needy honors God".

Third, as noted, Anna was not a passive recipient of the good news. As soon as she saw the child, "she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem". She was not shy about her faith, keeping it as a private matter for fear of ridicule, as we all do to some degree today. Instead, she was witnessing to the people about the gospel, despite her great age. I'm reminded of Joan and her visits to China, we who are relatively young have a lot to learn from those following God obediently in helping those in darkness to come into Jesus' light.

So there we have Anna, a woman about whom we learn little, but whose faith and devotion speak to us down the centuries. As we contemplate the wonder of Christ's birth, will we respond like Anna with renewed devotion, humility and bold faith in 2009?

We are now moving into a time of prayer. If there is anything in this reflection that leads you to want prayer, don't leave without it!