

## Meditation

What did you see? What did you hear?

What are you looking for? What have you found?

We've hear the story of Simeon and Anna – inside the temple for long years –  
waiting, watching

Perhaps a bit like us – waiting for the spring, waiting for the restrictions to be lifted

Waiting to see God at work again in the way we expect –

These days we're encouraged to go out looking for signs of Spring –

Snowdrops and crocuses and daffodils ...

Which seems to give us some hope,

But then, an early spring is not always a hopeful sign in these days of climate change...

Perhaps we, like the ancient Jews, are limited in our imaginations

About what new life – or hope – or God's presence -- might look like

For us: is God only in the Spring? Or in the outcome of vaccines?

For the Jews: is the Messiah only to come in a blaze of glory?

Perhaps we, like the ancient Jews,

have felt that God has abandoned us all in this difficult time --

Especially with so many people dying or becoming very ill so suddenly –

When people are losing their work and their businesses...

Even more so when these are people we know and love.

When hard times come our way, we want to shake our fist or turn our back on God.

We cry out: "How can there be a good God when things are going so badly?"

Simeon and Anna's stories remind us that God's presence is with us

In ways that we haven't fully anticipated

In forms that we haven't expected.

There are ways to catch glimpses of God in our midst

That don't ignore the reality of our difficult situations.

Looking at Simeon's story, we're reminded that he was an elder of the temple

when the Jewish people were chafing under the foreign rule of a narcissistic ruler, Herod.

It couldn't have been easy for him to keep urging the people to look for the Messiah

In such troubled times.

Simeon was known to be a righteous man, a holy man – one filled with God's Spirit –

the kind that people sought out when they came to the temple.

He had been promised that he would see the Messiah before he died.

And so he kept his eyes and ears and heart opened

For that promise to be fulfilled.

It was quite a promise! I wonder what that would mean to each of us –

If each of us were assured that we would see God at work in our midst,

Maybe even during pandemic restrictions...

Would we know what to look for?

Would we know where to look?

I wonder about my friend, Methodist Bishop Rev Kap Tluanga in Myanmar

Whose country is again under martial law...

Where is God at work in all this?

Simeon went into the temple – because that’s where God was known to be.  
And that’s where people gathered to hear a word from the Lord.  
And that, indeed, was where Mary and Joseph went with their infant son.  
*But what about when our places of worship are closed? When we can’t get there...  
Is that the only place we can find God at work or hear a Word from the Lord?*

In today’s reading there was someone else already in that temple  
The widow Anna was living there!  
But her situation was perhaps the opposite of ours –  
Rather than not being able to get to the temple,  
Anna was living there and not really able to get out...  
Anna had been living there in the temple – perhaps with several others --  
Perhaps as an act of charity by the temple authorities  
Since she had become a widow.  
As a widow, Anna would not have any social or familial protection or status --  
So perhaps the temple was her protection.  
Perhaps living there was her choice – or her only option.  
In any case, the temple walls were likely the boundaries of her daily life.  
Perhaps she would associate with our feeling of restrictions –  
Same four walls day after day...

The scripture tells us she was 84 – which probably seemed even older in those days  
Than it does now...  
And while we might regard Anna as an old woman stuck in a difficult situation,  
In my mind’s eye, she’s still got an eagerness about her –  
Even in the prescribed boundaries of the temple walls.  
She still has a bright eye looking out for how God is at work  
Perhaps it was her delight just to be there in the temple, day after day.  
Spending her days praying and praising God.  
I wonder whether the fact that she was so tuned in to God  
Was *because* she lived in the temple or *why* she lived in the temple.  
In either case, she’d learned that that temple, *her* temple – the one she shared with God --  
Rather than being a place of stifling isolation and restriction --  
Was a place of love and being loved.  
Her solitary place of confinement was her ‘God Zone’  
And the loveliness she cultivated there permeated out to all who came around ...

It was within this temple, in her days of praying and praising God,  
That God shaped Anna into a person who—  
Rather than being useless, as society thought --  
Had time and space to learn to see God at work in difficult situations  
And to sense God’s presence in what seemed to be ordinary people.

Perhaps you’ve known people like that as well:  
People so firmly residing within a God Zone, a constant awareness of God’s presence,  
That we feel God’s presence when we’re near them.  
When Deacon Vic Downs was sharing the story of Eli and Samuel with us last week,  
I was reminded how important it is,  
not only for the younger ones to be pointed in God’s direction,  
but for the older ones to gently *do* that pointing.

Perhaps that's what Anna was doing  
with that young couple coming to the temple with their new baby...  
Pointing out to them that God was with them in their midst... in that tiny baby. Emanuel.

I remember when we were living in India, several people in the States would pray for us.  
There was a older woman named Emma Wallenta from N Alabama  
Who regularly prayed for us –  
She didn't really know us in the beginning, but just felt God leading her to pray for us.  
About once a month I'd receive a card from Emma in my school postbox –  
Inevitably it was a source of joy and relief –  
just to know someone far away was praying for me!  
At Christmas, she would send gifts to our children as well – colouring books and stickers!  
I would write back to her to let her know what was happening with us  
And our work and our family. We developed a friendship.  
We met her in person once when we were on furlough in the States –  
She was at the church dinner  
and we got to put a face with the handwritten greetings on the cards.  
When we returned to India, the cards kept coming,  
Though one month it was a bit late...  
When it finally did arrive, there was a different handwriting on the back of the envelope.  
It was a message from her nephew to say that Emma had died –  
And this card was on her writing table to come to me –  
Already addressed and stamped – so he sent it on to me as it was.  
I'd like to think Anna in the temple was something like that –  
Perhaps physically confined by her circumstances  
But still firmly in the God Zone, still overflowing with God's love  
And wanting to share it with all God's children  
In any way she could.

Anna would have had an eye for who needed to know God loved them still.

==

The work of the Anna Chaplaincy project is named after this Anna from Luke's gospel.  
In a few moments Julia Burton-Jones will tell us something about the project  
We're reminded that there are so many people who still need to know God's love  
Wherever they are, in whatever circumstances...  
And we have the privilege of being part of that telling  
Regardless of our circumstances and what others might regard as restrictions --  
Recently there was an online webinar about the work of MHA which several of us attended.  
MHA is trying to expand its work with older people  
And with those with dementia across Kent.  
We were reminded how many there are who need someone to reach out to them –  
And that the only tools which are really needed are a telephone and some time!  
There are skills which might need some training –  
But that can be provided.  
Mostly what's needed is a love for God and for other people.  
Anna's story reminds us that God can use  
even when the rest of the world might have decided we're too old or frail  
or locked away in isolation.  
There are still ways we can catch glimpses of God in difficult times  
And we can pass them on to others in their isolation and difficult times.