

St Mary Magdalen Festival Weekend
High Mass of Our Lady
Mthr Sarah Foot

Genesis 18: 9-15

1 Cor 1: 18-31

Luke 2: 33-40

+ ‘At that moment Anna came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’ (Luke 22: 38)

The Presentation of the infant Christ in the Temple and the encounter of the Holy Family with the aged Simeon are deeply rooted in Anglican DNA thanks to Cranmer’s beautiful Evensong liturgy. Simeon’s song of thanksgiving at having seen God’s salvation, and the hymn that Our Lady sang on her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, have often proved inspirational in drawing people into the faith of the church.

Yet, as Luke tells the story, the central figures in the narrative of the Presentation are neither Mary, nor Simeon alone, but two elderly people: Simeon and the prophet Anna. Both had waited

patiently for God's intervention and the salvation of Israel; both recognized the infant for who he was; neither kept their epiphany secret. Shadowy as Anna may be to a contemporary congregation, her name resonated powerfully in the rhetoric of the early Church.

'Patient in expectation', Anna had remained for many years faithful to the dead, nourished in her ascetic life of prayer and fasting by a hope of fulfilment, ultimately attained. Her example was explicitly invoked not just in medieval sermons and other Christian prescriptive and admonitory literature, but also in the liturgical ceremonies for consecrating women to the religious life. Next after Mary, the blessed Virgin, Anna was the most important single role-model for women who sought to devote themselves to God in the early middle ages. Her example was a significant inspiration for the women who gathered in Oxford's first Christian community, St Frideswide's, forerunner to the Cathedral where I serve.

What might Anna's song have been when she met the infant Christ? How might *she* have couched her praise to God? What would she have had to say about this child and his role in the redemption

of Jerusalem? Perhaps she expanded on Simeon's alarming prophecy about Christ's destiny, his warning that a sword would pierce Mary's own soul. There must have been others – other parents making their offerings for first-born infants – in the Temple at the same time. God could have revealed the truth of Jesus' identity to any of them. But it seems significant that those who saw and testified to Christ's glory were both old, remarkably old, indeed, given average life-expectancy in first-century Palestine.

Old age is also a theme of our first reading and the encounter between Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, and God, who visited him with two angels, all three taking on the appearance of men. Abraham and Sarah offered their unexpected guests lavish hospitality and in return Abraham received a blessing and the promise that Sarah would bear him a son. That promise made Sarah laugh, but not with the joyful laughter of the psalmist that fills the mouth. Hers was inward, hidden laughter: Sarah laughed to herself. Rebuking her, God reminded her that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord (words that bring to mind the angel's words to Mary when he told her of the barren Elizabeth's pregnancy, Luke 1: 37).

Sarah would go on to bear a son to Abraham, a son whose name Isaac means 'he will laugh', or simply 'laughter'.

The books of the Old Testament are filled with people who reached venerable old ages, not only the early patriarchs like Noah, Abraham and Isaac, but also many of the prophets who necessarily lived what were, for their own times, remarkably long lives. Prophets needed to live long, for much of their claim to prophetic insight depended on their age and thus their long exposure to the words and visions of the Almighty. The aged prophets of Israel preserved the past experience of God's people and foretold its fate.

Yet the fact of the Incarnation and the manifestation of the identity of the Messiah to the wise men at Bethlehem, and to Simeon and Anna in the presentation in the Temple, meant that there was no further need for prophets. This infant was the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets had spoken (John 1: 45). John the Baptist would be the last great prophet, but he was not old; with youthful vigour, he would prepare the ways of the Lord and make his ways straight. And with the end of the need for prophets, we find in the New Testament a shift

away from the witness of those who have attained old age into a narrative carried forward by the actions and energies of the young.

Jesus and his disciples were all men in the prime of life, many of whom would have that life cut short for affirming their belief in the salvation promised by the Messiah. Remember Jesus' call to the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who left their nets to follow him. They also left their aged father sitting in the boat, his fishing business in ruins, uncertain who would care for him in his old age (Mark 1: 19-20; Matthew 4: 21-22). The particular need that the Jewish people had once had for wise prophecy from the elders among them had passed in the coming of the new dispensation.

In the narrative of the Presentation we encounter the last two prophets cast in the Old Testament mould. Their age and devotion were the necessary preconditions for their receipt of this marvellous revelation. Both were righteous and devout, regular worshippers and familiar with the law of Moses and the words of the prophets. Their testimony resonated for those who heard it uttered (perhaps above all for Mary); and it continues to speak to us. Their words revealed that the deliverance and hope that the infant Christ's birth

had brought did not represent a tale of unalloyed joy. The pain and suffering of Calvary were already immanent in this moment of celebration of a first-born's birth. But the birth of the Saviour also brought other losses, including the loss of a specific function for the elderly to prophesy the future coming of the Messiah.

This is not something on which the Church dwells very often. We live in a culture that tends to celebrate youth, fame and achievement. Yet, in this story, Simeon and Anna gain their authority to speak to us and to make us listen from their long years of devoted service to God. Their example should therefore cause us to reflect on our own attitudes towards the ageing, and not just about how to provide for older people financially, or to pay for their social care. Broader issues of social justice confront us all, but arguably the Church above all, because it has a spiritual responsibility to the ageing. Yet do we have a developed theology of ageing? When we talk about the demographics of church attendance, we tend to see age as the problem, to allow our eyes to pass over the white and grey heads in the pews in order to lament the absence of youth.

That, of course, is not a Mary Mags problem. This church stands out for the success of its mission to students and young people, a devout and lively group of men and women who play an active role in the life and worship of this church. Many of them, and many previous generations of young worshippers, have explored vocations to the priesthood through the encouragement of Fr Peter and his predecessors. The strength and size of the guild of clergy whose launch we are marking this weekend gives bodily testimony to the importance of this particular ministry in this church.

‘Consider your own call, brothers and sisters’, St Paul urged the Corinthians. That is just what those who will gather this weekend have done.

Yet, while we rightly rejoice in that success, we need to remember that this congregation also includes a number of much older people – Simeons and Annas – who have grown old in their faithful devotion to this church, providing continuity and stability for the constantly changing groups of students, renewed and refreshed each Michaelmas Term. The old have an essential role in this church, and in all our churches, as Stanley Hauerwas has reminded us in his *Growing Old in Christ*. They are the keepers of the meaning, the

repository and tellers of the story of the communion of saints. Christian communities live by memory - our central Eucharistic feast is, after all, a feast of memory; we should treasure the recollections of those who have kept faithful vigil here over so many years

As we celebrate the ministry of the many clergy who once worshipped here, and rejoice in the number of current members of the congregation at different stages in the process of discernment, or already training for ordination, let us also acknowledge the gifts so generously shared with each of us on our own journeys by the wider church congregation, especially its older members (both lay and ordained). We could profitably reflect on what we have done to celebrate and give thanks for *their* ministry to *us*, to laugh with them and share their joys. Too often we have failed to share in their memories and to listen to their lived experiences of faith and witness to the gospel; we have not encouraged them to tell of *their* own epiphanies, instead of boring them with ours.

In his poem *A Song for Simeon*, TS Eliot gave voice to one whose 'life is light, waiting for the

death wind, / like a feather on the back of my
hand.' His Simeon prayed

Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and
unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-
morrow.

May it be our call, sisters and brothers, to ensure
that we find that tomorrow for all among whom we
minister and worship, the old as well as the young.