

Luke 2:22 – 40

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Imagine...

You've been coming to the temple for years now. Once you were married, part of a family, caught up in the day to day, but it was so long ago that it barely seems real now. Now you spend your time here in the temple, you can pray quietly in the corner and no one pays you much mind. Besides, there's always something going, something to watch or listen to

Imagine...

the noise of vendors selling food or animals for sacrifice or exchanging coins. There is music, singing, dancing. And the smell! All those visitors who've

travelled in from the countryside, and the crowds from home. Not to mention the animals! Somewhere at the back of it you can just catch the scent of incense, from the parts of the temple complex where only the priests can go.

And there, just arriving, is a family with a small baby – it looks like they're up from the countryside to make a sacrifice as is right and proper. You've seen them all. The wealthy families making a great ceremony of the day and then the ones like this group - Just a couple of small birds for their sacrifice, the offering set down for the poorest of people.

But this child, THIS child...

What did Anna see? The gospel reading tells us "she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem". Can you imagine – this old lady who's practically part of the furniture, suddenly starts praising and talking to anyone who will listen about this non-descript baby in the temple with his insignificant, poor, country-bumpkin family.

What did she see?

The text tells us a little bit more about what Simeon saw. And the painting you have in front of you tells us something about what Rembrandt thought Simeon saw.

This painting was perhaps the last that Rembrandt ever made. It was found, unfinished, on an easel in his studio after his death in 1669. The female figure at the back – is it Anna, or perhaps it's Mary – was probably painted in later by someone else.

The heart of the picture is the relationship between the old man and the baby. The child is looking up at the man's face while the man's eyes are turned downward towards the infant in his arms. The creamy soft colour of Simeon's face and beard matches the baby's clothes and draws the two figures together. And the light in the picture is centred on that connection, while much else is

shadowy. This image shows an intimate encounter between two people across the decades – one at the very start of his life, the other at the end.

And out of this connection come Simeon's words:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your  
people Israel

And you may well know a different translation rather better: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. Words which are sung in chapels and churches and cathedrals every evening of the week. And they're also sung at funerals.

Simeon is a man who lives in expectation of his death. And he's been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah. When he sees the child that Mary and Joseph have brought to the temple, he knows that before him is the one he's been waiting for. "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace according to your word" "Now I can die in peace having seen what I have been promised".

Simeon is often imaged as an old man, just as Anna is an old woman, although the text never says as much. But it does seem fitting – someone contemplating their end and looking towards death. And certainly Rembrandt has painted Simeon as an old man. His hair thinning, his beard white. And look at his hands, I've read that he's holding them in prayer, but to me they look more like elderly and arthritic hands. As if Simeon no longer has the dexterity to hold the child in his hands but instead has put out his forearms and on them Mary has carefully rested her son. And you'd need a fair bit of strength to hold something on your arms like that. So he's probably sitting down, resting his arms on his knees.

And we see in this painting the peace of an old man, his body worn out by the years, who has seen everything that he needs to see. Who has lived all that he needs to live.

Simeon and Anna have both been waiting a long time, searching for God. Anna's been praying and fasting in the temple for perhaps 60 years. And Simeon is described as righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel. And now for each of them their expectation has met. Their desire has been filled. Both have now seen.

And Simeon has received peace and in that peace faces the end of his life. While Anna seems to have been given a new life. There she is rushing around, talking to anyone who will listen.

What did they see?

In first century Jerusalem, many Jews were eager for change. They were living under Roman rule and they were far from being the great nation that their history told them they should be, ruled by mighty kings of old like David or Solomon. And there were all sorts of ideas about how Israel could rediscover its former glory. If you've ever seen the Monty Python's *the life of Brian* where there is row of prophets standing along the side of the road, each trying to out-prophecy the other you might not be a million miles away.

We know that there were some who thought the answer was to retreat from the city and live an ascetic life. You might have heard of the Dead Sea scrolls; they were part of a library of a such sect who lived in the Judean desert and kept apart from mainstream society. And there were the pharisees who thought that the way forward was for every Jew to carefully and precisely keep all the laws of the Torah. And then there were Sadducees, for whom being a good Jew was about proper worship in the temple.

Amongst these clashing ideologies we find the hope of the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ. Would the Messiah be a military leader to overthrow

the Roman empire, a political leader to restore the status of Israel, a great spiritual leader to bring the people back to their God.

What no one was expecting is what the Gospel writer is telling us they got. The Messiah that Simeon has been promised he will see turns out to be a baby. Anna's good news about the redemption of Jerusalem is nothing more than an infant. And a poor one at that, from an unsophisticated, provincial family. Who would guess that God would choose to save all people by becoming a fragile, defenceless child?

Simeon's words call this child a light. And we can see this light in the picture. The brightness of the stripes on the child's garments and the luminosity of his face make it seem almost as if the child himself is the source of the light. The author of this Gospel isn't alone in calling Christ a light. Jesus calls himself the light of the world and the writer of John's Gospel says "What was coming into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

There is much in our own lives that we could call darkness. What Anna and Simeon teach us is that if we are looking for it, we might find the light. We might find the peace of Simeon and the excitement of Anna. But we may well not find it in quite the way we are expecting.