



## Advent – time of fullness

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008 ● Rev Heather

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is thy faithfulness.  
"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."  
The LORD is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.  
Lamentations 3:22-26*

It is good to be starting out together on our journey through Advent. Some of us made an early start yesterday at our workshop, the culmination of which was that each of us made an Advent candle which symbolized our longing and expectation for Advent.

The theme for our workshop was "The Coming of the Sun Spirit" and, as you can see by the first of the four panels on the wall beside the altar, this will continue to be a theme through Advent. The words on today's panel come from our final song, "O come, O come, Emmanuel", one of the great Advent hymns.

In his gospel, Matthew quotes words from the prophet Isaiah from several centuries before Christ:

*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and his name shall be called Emmanuel.*

The name Emmanuel means "God with us". When the early Christians heard those words they understood them as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus. When Isaiah spoke those words, he was probably referring to the political situation in Israel at that time. But they also had a deeper and fuller significance for the future. Like John, the seer of Revelation, Isaiah's words spoke to the people of his time about their immediate situation. They also pointed down the years to what would come in the future. God's presence would be known on earth. The Word would become flesh and dwell amongst us. Emmanuel – God with us.

'O come, O come, Emmanuel' is a song of longing that we might experience that abiding presence. Israel metaphysically represents the people of God, those who are on the spiritual path and who long for a fuller revelation of Christ in their lives. So it is our song in this time of Advent.

This morning we are going to visit the temple in Jerusalem and meet an old man and an old woman who knew this longing. The old man was a prophet named Simeon, and the old woman was a prophetess named Anna.

This is the story as it is told in Luke, chapter 2:25-38.

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy*

*Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the spirit he came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,*

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word;*

*for mine eyes have seen thy salvation  
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.*

*And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him, and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,*

*Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel,  
and for a sign that is spoken against*

*(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also),  
that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*

*And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

These two people were old, 'full of years' as the Bible sometimes describes it. Simeon was evidently nearing the end of his life. Anna was eighty-four. They were 'full of years' literally, and they had been enriched and blessed by what they had experienced in their lives. Their years had been full. We know this because a great gift was given to them to crown the years.

One of the things that had developed in Simeon and Anna through the years was that they knew how to wait.

This is not such a popular idea in our present world. If the car in front does not take off the moment the lights change, horns honk. We want everything to be instant – communication, food, relationships even. If people today want something, they want it now - if not yesterday! The art of waiting is on the wane. In Simeon and Anna it was highly developed.

### **Empty and Full Waiting**

Not all waiting is good. It can be a substitute for taking action because we are afraid or not very interested or just want to leave things to work themselves out without any effort from us. This kind of waiting is empty; it does nothing to strengthen us.

Charles Dickens has a character called Mr Micawber who spent quite a bit of time in debtors' prison. Micawber was always waiting for something to turn up, but he did not know what. He had no clear sense of what he was waiting for and never did anything to make things happen. We could call that an empty waiting.

The waiting of people like Simeon and Anna is very different. It is purposeful. It is full and fruitful. It is like the waiting of a mother for the birth of her baby. It is like watching a new baby grow. It is enjoying each stage in the growth of a plant you have nurtured. It is being at peace with the idea that the results of something you do now will not be evident until later on. There is trust in the process that is taking place, and therefore a willingness to go step by step through the waiting time.

Simeon and Anna waited many years for the coming of the Christ. They knew what they were waiting for and this waiting built something within them. New faculties opened up. Expectation and hope were kept alive. They were receptive.

### **They were devout**

Simeon must have been well-known and well-loved, particularly in that small group of people who, like him, waited for the promised Messiah to appear. We are told that he was righteous and devout and that the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Anna too was devout. She had spent years in the temple, worshipping, praying for the coming of the Messiah and prophesying. Perhaps some of the temple-goers thought her to be something of a religious maniac, not understanding the depth of her devotion to God.

The lives of these two old people were focused on God and his promises. They had devoted their lives in his service. We notice that this devoutness was expressed in different ways. For Anna, the temple was virtually her home. She may even have had a room on the temple mount. Simeon, on the other hand, visited the temple from time to time. We can think of Anna as representing the soul and feeling levels which are constantly in the presence of God, whatever is happening on the outer levels, and Simeon as representing thinking which is illuminated by the Spirit.

### **They were inspired by the Spirit**

Through the years of prayerful waiting, they had learned to listen to the inner voice of the Spirit. Simeon's name is a form of Simon, and so it too means "listening". He had spent years learning to discern the voice of the Spirit within him from all other voices. One day he heard that voice tell him that before he died he would see what he had waited for – the Christ child – and this sustained him in faith and hope.

Perhaps Simeon had not planned to go to the temple on the day Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus there. But the inner voice was so insistent that Simeon set aside everything else in his life for that day in order to follow the leading of Spirit. He did not know what the outcome of that temple visit would be, but he chose to act in harmony with his inner spiritual direction.

In the temple he saw Mary and Joseph and the child. He went to them and took the baby in his arms. You can imagine him standing there, cradling the child, perhaps with tears streaming down his face or perhaps with a tender smile. Following his inner prompting had led him to the longed-for child of salvation.

Anna, too, knew what it was to be guided by the Spirit. She was in the temple, as always. Like Simeon, she was drawn to the very place where Mary and Joseph and the child were. There she found what she had been waiting for.

These two, who had learned to wait and then to respond immediately to the movement of the Spirit within them, were among the first to recognise the child.

### **They had intuitive knowledge**

Through the years of devoted waiting and listening, Simeon and Anna had become insightful people. When they saw the child, they recognised who he was. They intuitively knew that the years of preparation and waiting were now ended, that their hope was fulfilled.

When Simeon took the child in his arms he perceived, as it were, a great light shining from him, and he saw that one day that light would reveal God to all people, not just to the Jews. The day that was dawning would be for the whole world.

It must have been the most wonderful day of Simeon's life. No wonder he could say "Now I can die happy." Except that he said it much more poetically:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.*

Simeon's perception enabled him to know that in future years this child, as the man Jesus Christ, would face opposition. People would be raised up by his presence among them or he would be a stumbling block to them and they would fall. These were the two responses that would be possible to those who encountered him – either to elevate their consciousness or to fail to grasp the opportunity offered.

Simeon also saw Mary's soul being pierced by a sword. The sword is a symbol of the will. Mary's soul would be receptive to the will of God, even when that meant deep sorrow for her.

Insight and intuition – the fruits of waiting. They were awakened in Anna also. She too knew intuitively who this child was and what he would become.

Simeon and Anna had been part of the group who waited with hope and expectation for the coming of the Messiah. Now they became part of the small group who understood the significance of the birth of Jesus. To Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist), the shepherds from Bethlehem, the eastern magi, were added these two prophets who had grown wise in their waiting.

The shepherds had told anyone who would listen what they had seen and heard. Now Anna spoke freely to those who were waiting for the Messiah. The news of this birth and its meaning began to spread to people who were receptive.

### **Advent and Waiting**

Simeon and Anna's devoted waiting and longing awakened inspiration and intuition in them. This can be our experience also through this Advent season.

Advent is a time of fullness, of purposeful waiting. It is a time for listening with our inner ear and responding to the quiet promptings of Spirit and of the angels who hover around earth at this season.

One longing that a number of people expressed yesterday in our workshop was for stillness. In Advent, as we wait, we are inwardly still and nourish our souls through reflection and meditation. Such waiting bears fruit in our lives. As the passage Nadine read said:

*The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.*

Each day of Advent brings us the opportunity to choose inner stillness, to listen for the Spirit, so that with glad and grateful recognition we will welcome the awakening of the holy child within us.

So shall it be.

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