Simeon, Anna, and Jesus
Luke 2:21-38

Before Christmas I was talking to a friend who told me that every two years his company surveys its employees. And he said the results are fascinating, because those who are new to the company typically think it's great, while those who have been there for 10 years of more, see everything that's wrong - and the ones with the most experience have the most criticisms.

But what's true of that company is true of life, isn't it? That as the years go by you can pick up more hurts and scars, and you become more critical, more cynical, more jaundiced. And that can be true of the world out there, but it can also be true of churches, and the Christian life. And the joy and the wonder of life and faith is slowly replaced by a steely eye for everything that's wrong.

But what if instead of growing tired and cynical with age, you could exude life and joy and expectation to the generation to come? Because that's what we see happening in today's passage, as we meet two people - Simeon and Anna who are far gone in years - and between them had ample reason to be critical or even bitter - and yet they're the opposite. So how did they do it?

Well, what becomes clear is it doesn't begin with them at all. It begins with them being caught up in a story far bigger than themselves, and them realising that.

So we're going to look at 4 things: the humility of Jesus, the patience of Simeon, the thankfulness of Anna, and the pain of Mary.

The Humility of Jesus
Look at v21, 'And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.'

Now, on the first Sunday of Advent, Jonathan Escarra reminded us that when a couple first learns they're going have a baby it's unforgettable, because life is never going to be the same again. But when does a woman learn she's going to have a baby? Maybe a month in, after a missed period? Maybe a bit before that from nausea? However early it is, it's always *after* conception isn't it?

But here, Luke reminds us that the angel visited Mary prior to conception, telling her, v31, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."

And let's face it, an angelic visitation beats a little blue strip on a pregnancy test, or waking up feeling nauseous, doesn't it. Even more so when the angel tells Mary that her Son will be conceived by God himself, and inherit the throne of her ancestor David, and rule forever.

And so as Mary and Joseph take this baby to be circumcised on the 8th day, he is unlike any other baby ever born. And the one being held in his mother's arms is the one who upholds all things by his power. The One quietly breathing against Mary's chest is the one who gives life and breath to all.

And yet, he is still a baby isn't he?

And when they take him to the temple to offer the sacrifice of purification, Luke quotes the Law, v23, that "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord." Think about that: Jesus opened the womb. And we don't need to go into the graphic details, but Jesus - God come in human flesh, all that infinite and indescribable power compressed and concentrated and condensed

down into one, two, four, eight cells, growing and multiplying inside Mary's womb until the contractions came, and the waters broke, and the Son of God himself went through the process of labour and was born, and laid on Mary's chest.

And then, like any other Jewish boy, he's circumcised. And like any other Jewish mother, Mary offers the sacrifice. Except, she's not quite like every other Jewish mother, because her offering, v24, 'A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons' was the sacrifice of the poor, for those who could not afford a lamb.

And so it's not just that Jesus was conceived and born as a human baby. That is humility enough. It's that the family he chooses aren't wealthy. They're not even middle class. They're poor. And.. .the One who wrote the Law submits to it.

And so the one who is so far higher than any other, humbles himself and comes so very low.

What has that got to do with growing cold, or critical, or cynical with age? It's that it undermines the narrative that life is all about me. You see, we grow cold, or angry on the inside when we think we're not getting what we deserve. But isn't that often because we have a self-centred view of life, or an over inflated view of ourselves?

But *here* we see God humbling himself.

Or maybe you just feel tired, spiritually tired, and life and faith has lost its lustre. So think of the wonder that the One whose birth the angel foretold *was born*. *Physically* born. That the one whose command myriads of angels obey, humbled himself that he might serve and save you. Let that story seep into your heart, and let the wonder return.

Because it was *that* story that Simeon and Anna found themselves caught up in. And it had kept them expectant and hopeful for years.

The Patience of Simeon

Over the last several years, there's been a seemingly endless, and tragic, stream of church leaders who have fallen, or been exposed as having used others for their own ends. But of course, that's not new is it? In both the Old and New Testament's we're given examples of leaders who use religion as a power trip. And keep reading through Luke's gospel and you begin to encounter them.

But that's one of the reasons Simeon stands out. Because as commentators point out, he's part of a godly remnant. Godly because, though he is old, his faith is real, and sincere. And remnant because there weren't many like him. There weren't many who hadn't been sucked into the world's ways of seeing life or using others.

Look how Luke describes him. Verse 25, 'Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.'

Look at that word 'waiting.' How long had he been waiting? We're not told, are we, but the implication from v29, where he says 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace' is that he has reached the end of his life, and he knows it, and the waiting has been long, but now it's over.

So… how good are you at waiting? Have you ever found yourself on the phone to a call centre or help desk, or sitting in traffic, and your frustration is mounting. Or have you stood in line at the checkout wondering why the person on the till is *so* incompetent, or why the elderly person being served is *so* slow, or why did you pick *this* line when *that one* over there is going so much faster?

Temptation tugs at our impatience doesn't it? And we get disgruntled, frustrated, angry even, looking for someone to blame, when things are not going at the speed we want.

But could that also be true of the way we feel about God? At least sometimes. When it feels like he is not acting on our timescale. And we want him to deliver for us *now*.

So look again at Simeon… 'righteous and devout, *waiting*…'

Waiting - but not frustrated. Waiting, but not grumbling. Waiting, and yet hopeful and expectant. Why? Well, firstly, v25, 'The Holy Spirit was upon him'. And secondly, v26, 'It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.'

So he's a guy allowing the Holy Spirit to hold sway in his heart and emotional life. Who's sensitive and open to the Spirit's teaching, *and* v27, to his guiding, 'He came in the Spirit into the temple.'

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul sets up a contrast, between two ways to live - there's life in the Spirit, or there's life in the flesh; there's walking by the Spirit in obedience to God, or there's doing the works of the flesh and living the way you want. And those works of the flesh, Paul says, include 'enmity, strife, jealousy, [and] fits of anger' (Gal 5:20). Which can sound a lot like us when we're impatient. But the fruit of the Spirit, Paul says, includes… what? 'Joy, peace, patience' (v22). Imagine you were able to display those character traits in your waiting, or when things are not going the way you want.

So think of the cuckoo, because apparently the cuckoo's a crafty bird, isn't it? It lays its eggs in another bird's nest. And when that other bird comes back and finds two chicks have hatched and there are two mouths to feed, one its own chick and the other the cuckoo's, it has a choice doesn't it? Because the one it feeds is the one that'll grow.

So as you watch Simeon, grey haired but righteous, devout and waiting, heading to the temple, ask yourself, which one has he been feeding? The flesh, or the Spirit? And then ask it of yourself, as well. You see, just think of the year to come - you're going to be bombarded with reasons to feed the flesh, aren't you? And temptation is going to tug at your impatience. It's going to use those moment when life is not going the way you want and probe your armour. But allow it to do that and it will rob you of your joy and replace it with frustration and discontent which, by definition, are joy-less.

Instead, what has Simeon been doing in his waiting? Verse 26 again, 'It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' Now, we're not told how it was revealed to him. But it's not stretching it to imagine that as he read and studied the prophets and how they spoke of the coming of the messiah, and as he prayed for the Lord to do just that, and to console and comfort Israel, the Lord had given him an inner assurance that he would live to see his prayers answered.

So when he enters the temple, and sees Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus, v27-28, 'according to the custom of the Law, [and] he took him up in his arms and blessed God' he is seeing *physically* what he has already seen *spiritually*, *in God's word, through the Spirit*. And that has sustained him in his waiting.

But the same can be true for you. Just listen to his prayer as he holds Jesus in his arms, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, *according to your word*; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (v29-32). So he is thanking God for his promise kept. And as you read God's word, and allow his Spirit to show you how all his promises have been kept in Christ, you'll know *even better than Simeon* that even as you wait, you can trust him. Because when Simeon talks of Jesus being a light to the gentiles and salvation reaching the ends of the earth, he's quoting a prophecy of Isaiah, from 700 years before. But Simeon only got to see the tiny, hold-him-in-your-arms, beginning of that. *We get to live it*. And if God has kept *that* promise you can know that though his timing is not yours, he is faithful and will not forsake you.

But did you notice what it does for Simeon specifically? Verse 29 again, "Now you are letting your servant depart in peace." In other words, he's ready to die. He has seen Christ, so he knows he can trust him in the last journey of all. So, getting old doesn't need to make us more cynical, but neither does it need to make us more fearful. Instead, when we have seen Christ and his promises kept, we too can age and depart in peace.

But then, another person joins the baby-holding party.

The Thankfulness of Anna

And Anna has plenty of reasons *not* to be thankful, doesn't she? Look how Luke describes her, 'There was a prophetess, Anna… she was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eight-four.' (v36-37)

So she was probably widowed in her mid-twenties and here she is, still a widow, aged 84. It's almost certainly not the script she would have written for her life aged 24, is it? And *this* in an environment where widows were uniquely vulnerable. I mean, does she even own, or have the money to rent a house? We're not told, are we, but what we are told is that 'She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.' (v37). So she's made the temple precincts her home. So is she a rough sleeper, dependent on the alms-giving of those who come to worship?

But then look at her family tree. Verse 36 again, 'Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, *of the tribe of Asher*.' It seems like a passing comment, doesn't it? And maybe that's all that Luke means by it. Except he's a keen historian. And the tribe of Asher was one of the 10 tribes of northern Israel who were obliterated, and sent into exile by the Assyrians hundreds of years before because of their idolatry. So it's not exactly the heritage a devout Jewish believer would boast of, is it. I mean I say I come from Chichester, a beautiful cathedral city, because my real home town, Bognor, a few miles down the road, is anything but a beautiful city. And so no one boasts of coming from Bognor.

And Anna's from Asher, the Jewish equivalent of Bognor. But how would Luke know that unless Anna had preserved her history. And that in all the sin and unfaithfulness of her forebears, she had stayed faithful, because God had stayed faithful.

And so in her love-life and her finances, in her family background and social standing, Anna had plenty of reasons to have grown bitter, and curved in on herself in self-pity. But instead, her suffering has been swallowed up in thankfulness and worship.

Why? Well, look at v38. She sees Mary and Joseph and Jesus and Simeon, 'and coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all *who were waiting for the redemption of Israel*.'

So, like Simeon, she too has been waiting. Waiting for the redemption of Israel. And like Simeon she knows that she's been caught up in a story infinitely bigger than hers. A story in which God chooses people like her, the widows, the poor and the powerless, to bring about his purposes.

You see, we grow bitter and resentful, and thankfulness has a hard time getting a foothold in our hearts, when we think *we're* the main story, and life is about me, but it's not working out the way I want.

But Anna sees things differently. She sees her sufferings as just a part of the sufferings of Israel and God's great story to redeem that suffering. And she sees Simeon holding Jesus and she knows, just like Simeon knew, that the time for the righting of all that is wrong, and the healing of hurts and the redemption of God's people - has begun.

Great, but is that just the stuff of fairy tales? Because how is the salvation and the redemption that these two speak of going to come? How is the salvation and redemption that has the power to make sense of your suffering, and fill you with hope and joy and thankfulness and expectation, instead of criticism and cynicism, how is that going to become a reality?

The Pain of Mary

Go back to what Simeon said to Mary: v34-35: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

And Simeon and Anna were right, weren't they? Jesus *was* uniquely responsible for the rising, for the lifting up of many. Think of the lepers he healed and restored to society. Think of Jairus' dead daughter, or the widow of Nain's dead son who he physically, literally raised up. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well whose dignity he restored. Or the prostitutes and tax collectors - the cancelled of the day - who he lifted up.

And yet, for others, like the religiously and politically powerful, Jesus was their downfall, the stone they stumbled over. And so the humble he lifted up, but the proud he brought down. It's why Simeon said, Jesus was 'a sign to be opposed.'

Think about that. You see, all that Simeon said about Jesus was true - he was and is a light for revelation to the gentiles, and glory for God's people Israel. But did that mean life was comfortable and one long pyjama party? No. Jesus was right where God wanted him, doing exactly what God asked of him, yet he was opposed. And so if Anna teaches us that suffering is not the end of the story, neither is the opposition you might experience because of your faith in him. That too is also part of the far greater story.

You see, Simeon is seeing something more, isn't he? He sees, however dimly, that what Jesus will face will go beyond just criticism. A sword will pierce his mother's heart. Why? Because there will be times when she will struggle to understand how the promises made about her boy, could possibly be being fulfilled as he befriends tax collectors and sinners. And as the opposition intensifies, and reaches its peak, she takes her place as a bystander, and watches as her son is crucified. And as a spear pierces his side, a sword pierces her heart.

Because hanging on the cross is her son, who Simeon said would be the Lord's salvation, but did the Lord save him? And he was to be a light to the gentiles, but Mary is standing there in what should have been the hottest part of the day, but the day has grown dark and the sun has been blotted out, as the light of his life is snuffed out. And he was to be the glory of Israel, but she has heard him being mocked and scorned and spat upon by the very people who were supposed to glory in him. How sharp must that sword in her soul have felt?

And yet, it's precisely there and then that all that was said about him by Simeon and Anna was coming true. It was in him *not* being saved that he saved us. It was in his light being put out that light comes to us. It was in his shame that we can know his glory. Because it's there, at the cross, as the weight of all our sin pressed down on him, that we are lifted up and redeemed.

And if Mary's heart ached that day, think how it felt three days later, as she saw the tomb empty and her Son, *her Son!* risen again - and how joy and amazement flooded her heart!

You see, it's through the humility, and suffering, and faithfulness of Christ that light and glory, salvation and redemption come. So this coming year, read *your* story in the light of that far greater story and like Simeon and Anna hope and joy, thankfulness and worship will fill your heart also.