January 31st 2023. Luke 2: 22-40, The presentation of Jesus at the Temple, by Dr Maxwell Reid

For the past month we have been considering the story of Christmas and the beginnings of Christianity. The Christmas story tell us of God’s glad tidings of great joy to all people. Only Matthew and Luke spent any time on Jesus’ birth and childhood, and Matthew’s contribution to that was fairly minimalist.

Just 7 verses in Chapter 1 about the pre-birth period, and the short Chapter 2 dedicated wholly to the visit of the wise men including Herod’s total OTT temper tantrum when he found the wise men had tricked him. That drama ended with Joseph taking his family to Egypt for safety, and then back to Nazareth when danger had passed. So, the family’s flight to Egypt must have happened some time after today’s part of the story, and perhaps it might explain why Herod demanded they start the killing of boys up to the age of two.

It is only Luke who sees this childhood period as being important enough to write about it in any detail. Mark and John were solely preoccupied with Jesus as an adult. This was reflected by their writing about what he did as a grown man during his public ministry period. Luke differs from Mark, Matthew and John, as he was understood to be a Gentile Christian, one of Paul’s travelling companions, and a physician. His writing reflects this, emphasising the merciful, compassionate, prayerful, teacher side of Jesus, who showed special concern for women, the poor, and Gentiles.

Consequently, we can be grateful to Luke for giving us even this small insight into the beginning of Jesus’ life, and for Matthew identifying the visit of the wealthy Gentile foreigners.

So, at about 6 weeks old there was the trip to Jerusalem for the formal presentation in the Jerusalem Temple of the first-born son and his mother underwent purification. The custom at this point was the expectation that the family would bring a lamb to be offered as sacrifice, but if they were not wealthy enough to do that, then a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons would suffice.

These verses tell us much about Jesus' family because we can assume from their offering of two doves, that Jesus’ family was not wealthy, but probably not in abject poverty either. Joseph was a carpenter, and therefore they had some means, but nevertheless, he led a simple life.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they met a man whose name was Simeon. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. Simeon realised that this was the moment of prophecy fulfilment he had been told would happen before he died.

The child’s father and mother were amazed when Simeon blessed Jesus and made and such an extraordinary prophetic pronouncement about this baby, including the cryptic message to Mary of the future pain she would suffer which was a foretelling of the pain she would suffer witnessing the crucifixion.

Anna, a second prophet then appeared. Surprisingly, Luke went into some detail about Anna, her lineage, her age, and the fact that unlike Simeon who just turned up that day, she had spent her many years of widowhood in the women’s area of the Temple, committing her life to God with fasting and prayer. She too recognised the infant as the long-awaited Messiah and praised his arrival. She told everyone around her and thus, she became the first communicator of the ‘Good News’.

The appearance of these two godly people in the temple, where they recognize and proclaim Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, is the event which Luke chose to highlight as a very significant incident in Christ’s infancy, in addition to the visit of the shepherds. These inspired utterances of Simeon and Anna completely overshadowed the ceremony of Christ’s presentation which of course was the reason Joseph and Mary had travelled to the temple.

Luke took pains to give us the testimony of two old and wise prophets of Jewish piety with a full resume of life experience, along with statements of mature faith, sustained over years of not having any evidence their faith would be justified.

There are many ways in which this text and particularly the lives of Simeon and Anna apply to our contemporary Christian living. The first is as a reminder of what really matters in life. For Simeon, his occupation was not the most important thing, for we are not even told what his life’s work was.

What set Simeon apart from many others, including the religious leaders at the temple was that he was a man who totally trusted in God, who looked for His kingdom, and who was led by the Holy Spirit for his whole life. Anna too had waited patiently and faithfully for God to bring the promised Messiah. The coming of the kingdom of God was the one great hope, the one great motivation, the one great focus of these two devout people, and it should be ours as well.

Luke spent considerable time honouring these wise elderly people. They were probably frail and able to achieve little that counts on the scale of the economic rationalists, but they were rich sources of wisdom. While modern-day television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigour, and imagination, many congregations such as us have our own wise people. In our case – us of course, you and me, - who have spent our lives waiting for Jesus’ promised return. Notwithstanding the busyness of our lives even in retirement, it can be hard to wait quietly for God’s message, or even hear it when it comes.

We too need to have faith and patience, like Simeon and Anna, and believe that God will also reveal Himself to us in his own way, and his own good time. The Shepherds have gone back to the fields and the angels into heaven. The Wise Men have returned to the East, but God is still with us in Jesus.

So here we are, at the end of another year in an environment that includes a devastating combination of wars, suffering, homelessness and starvation. This is topped off with the progressive destruction and dislocation of our global society by disasters such as the recent ones in Australia, thought by scientists to be indicative of climate change. With all of this, sadly, it comes as no surprise that Christianity as a faith is no longer on the rise. Let’s hope that, like a classic car, the value bottoms out, and then begins to rise again.

But how do those of us committed Christians who remain, keep our faith, with no obvious evidence to support the theory. How do we sustain our faith. Each year we re-affirm the time, place, and circumstances of his arrival.

If his promised second coming doesn’t happen in our lifetime, that doesn’t change the fact that it will happen, and in the meantime, we travel in faith like Anna, our life journey with him at our side, with the faith that some time we will join him in heaven. In the meantime, let us pray for a better year in 2024.

Amen.