

Christmas 1
28/12/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 61:10-63:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

The gift of fulfilment

Everything we celebrated with joy at Christmas is continued and ornamented as our hymns and reading unfold today. The Gospel writers define Jesus through his encounters with others. In the birth stories many characters appear, and today we meet two - Simeon and Anna, devout people whose hearts yearned for the promised sign of God's presence. What they hoped for was given to them, and because of their faithfulness they were able to recognize that the divine energy had appeared in a life. These aged people rejoiced because they encountered the incarnate one, the life that made sense of life. Because of their recognition and blessing of the child Jesus, we are led to see that God among us is not a cold doctrine, but a person for us to embrace - a life to follow.

Simeon and Anna were people of the Temple and people of prayer. They were deeply enmeshed in the traditions of Israel and spent their lives waiting for the covenant of grace to be fulfilled. The biblical word for fulfilment has several senses. A net full of fish – abundance; the rough place made smooth – the release brought about by the removal of discomfort through the coming of justice and peace, such as we pray for between Israel and Palestine. A house filled with a pleasant fragrance – the heart opened in a place of community. The boy Jesus filled with Godly wisdom – grace and truth embodied.

We don't know why Simeon and Anna chose their life of waiting. Anna had had her disappointments but these had not distracted her from life in the Spirit. When the time came the event did not pass her by. She recognised the divine presence, and praised God.

Simeon had been promised he would see the fulfilment of Israel's hopes before he died, and when he took Jesus in his arms his words, grounded in the long and deep listening of the prophets, welled up to proclaim Jesus' significance for the whole world:

*Master, now let your servant depart 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.*

These were words of release for Simeon. He had felt God's decision to dwell amongst us and welcomed and blessed the child whose name, "Jesus" means, "God saves." If this was good news for Simeon, the last three lines of his song makes it clear the presence and splendour of God was active not for one race, or for a special caste – but for all people. The creator of all here has all in view and we must never forget that. In Jesus God works to embrace the whole world, and we cannot settle for a lesser vision.

As well as being the sign of God being true to God's promise the child Mary and Joseph had been given to cherish was also going to be contradictory and divisive. He would drive a sword through the soul cutting to the core. He would ask the deepest questions and reveal the thoughts of many hearts. Through him some people would fall and others would rise. Because of him many would have to think about the way they chose to live, and even his family would suffer because of him. The Prince of Peace would live to wage peace, to bring shalom, in the deepest sense, and this would be disruptive.

For Simeon and Anna it was a very rich day at the Temple in Jerusalem. What they saw had ultimate value, and from that time nothing could be the same again. At some time in life all of us will have long for our hopes to be fulfilled. Perhaps we set out to begin a new life in a new land. Maybe we trained for a special job and waited a long time for employment to come. Perhaps we spent long years planning a home, or a marriage, or a retirement. Perhaps we yearned for the sense of promise and continuity that grandchildren, or better still, great grandchildren, would bring. Or perhaps we yearned for some negative situation to pass away - for a divorce to be complete, for probate to be declared, for a dispute to be resolved. Maybe we longed for a project to conclude, or for a deep decision in life to be made. Occasionally we have been lucky enough to see what we have wished for to come to pass. And sometimes, when what we want is within our grasp, it is difficult to actually believe that the fulfilment has come.

The gift of Christmas is the message that greatest fulfilment we could hope for has broken into our stream of life. It is not based on a hope we have. It arises from a deep word that has been spoken to us: the promise of God. It comes from the source of all, and is the one thing that makes sense of the rest of life. Today we rejoice because we have this knowledge. And we are here to witness to this truth, so that other lives may find the consolation of this gift.