

It's ALL about Jesus

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- [0 : 0 0] At the beginning of the service, we asked ourselves what we were doing here. Well, what were Mary and Joseph doing at the temple on that day? They'd come to the temple in their obedience to the requirements of the law.
- Their sacrificial offering was the minimum that was required in such circumstances. In Leviticus 12, 6 and 8, it actually says, a lamb, but you can get away with a pair of doves or pigeons.
- Surely that expresses their poverty, that they were able only to offer the doves. Mary and Joseph had already acted obediently and faithfully to God's call on their lives, as we've heard over through Advent and the Christmas services.
- Mary's willing acceptance of Gabriel's message that she would bear God's son. Joseph taking Mary as his wife rather than divorcing her. Both taking on the responsibility of nurturing and guiding Jesus.
- They came with others on that day to present Jesus their firstborn son. What they encountered or encountered them amazed them.
- [1 : 2 6] They marveled at what was said about him. They'd already heard and knew the specialness of their son, of God's son. As we know, Mary was visited by the angel with the news that she would bear God's son.
- Joseph had been told it would be all right. And they'd been visited by the shepherds not long before this event. The shepherds visited by the angels and sped down to Bethlehem to worship this baby.
- And now, Simeon and Anna, these elder statesmen of the temple, making their proclamations. Word was getting out.
- The angels were busy. The Holy Spirit was active. Artificial intelligence has nothing whatsoever on God's ability to move.
- Mary and Joseph had accepted God's call on their lives and could but trust in his provision for all they would need. They had been through much, including travelling to Bethlehem for Caesar Augustus' census.
- [2 : 4 0] An overcrowded Bethlehem with no room for them. Merely animal quarters to act as a maternity ward. Where does this challenge our response to God's call on our lives?
- How obedient are we when God asks us to do something? A question to ponder. But what about Simeon?
- He was a man who lived closely with God and God with him. He lived in Jerusalem, which was a deeply religious context, where the learned, the positioned, the religious leaders lived.
- And in the midst of lots of religion, void of relationship, Simeon had a true relationship with God. And in a sense, we'll come to that, but it's about what we're doing here.
- A friend the other day was cited, we were in conversation the other day, and she cited her own childhood experience of being taken to church three times a day and finding it just all too much.

[3 : 45] And she's pretty much given up on faith. She has another friend who can't understand why she isn't religious. Sorry, she is a lady who describes her friend as religious, and her friend says, I can't understand why you don't have faith.

But as we have come to understand, I think, religion and a relationship with God are two different things. And yet it's through religious activity that we can become to know God better.

But back to Simeon. Simeon had paid attention. He had listened to what God said to him through the Holy Spirit. He heard the message that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

And he waited. And he waited. He had this close relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. But how did he wait?

He waited faithfully. He waited obediently. He waited patiently.

[5 : 04] He waited patiently. So that in that waiting, he was ready on that day when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord.

So that when the Spirit moved in Simeon, he obeyed and recognized the baby Jesus as the one he had been waiting for. This baby for Simeon was the completion of his life's waiting.

He was at peace as he took Jesus in his arms and gave thanks to God for the fulfillment of the promise to him.

He could now rest in peace. Simeon speaks of a life well lived and the ability to let go. Those words of the nunc dimittis that he spoke.

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

[6 : 14] Anna had had a long time of childless widowhood.

She spent all her time in the temple, completely focused on worship of God night and day, fasting and praying. In her faithful, obedient devotion to God, she waits expectantly.

She never leaves the temple. What is it that sustains her lifestyle? Is it not love?

Love of God and as a consequence, she grows in a closer relationship with him? In that obedience, that expectancy, that faith, she's rewarded for those long years in being there that day when Simeon makes his declaration.

She too gives thanks for Jesus. But that was not the culmination of her waiting. She went and told others about him and about his mission and purpose for the redemption of Jerusalem.

[7 : 31] Her patient, faithful obedience had called her to speak to those who were waiting for this good news, but needed someone to show them it wasn't as they might have expected it to be.

And interestingly, for this morning, I don't always read the Celtic Dairy Prayer, but I just happen to be at the moment. And a few lines from a piece by William Broderick says this, and I think it reflects on Anna.

We have to be candles burning between hope and despair, faith and doubt, life and death, all the opposites.

That is the disquieting place where people must always find us. And if our life means anything, if what we are goes beyond the monastery walls and does some good, it is that somehow by being here at peace, we help the world cope with what it cannot understand.

Anna had spent her time in the temple, not sitting idly, but in deep communion with God, so that she was ready to be able to go out and tell others of Jesus.

[8 : 57] Despite her age, but because of her faithful, obedient devotion, her closeness to God, and in her closeness to God, she heard his call to act, and she obeyed.

She started a new adventure focusing on Jesus. There was no retiring for Anna. Anna speaks of discipleship and mission at any age, and of the spontaneous need to share good news.

These two very elderly people are inspirational examples of lives lived patiently, faithfully, obediently, led by the Spirit in expectation of what God will do through them.

They are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Do we relate to them? Do we see such people around us today?

Is it how we seek to live? Expectant in our faith and obedient, and with a patient readiness in our relationship with Jesus, to be guided into waiting and acting, led by the Holy Spirit.

[10 : 14] How we wait shapes our responses when the waiting comes to fruition. For Simeon and Anna, their waiting was over, and the next chapter beginning.

Many are struggling in trying to provide for themselves and their families, and this time of year places added pressures on finances.

Many have mental health struggles and are often unable to recognise that or be able to talk about it. Many live with chronic illness or pain and are often misunderstood.

You may be one of them or know someone in that position. Many places in this world are torn apart by war and oppression.

Trying to make sense of it seems impossible. The numbers of people affected, killed, displaced, injured, are unimaginable. Many places are affected by drought, flood, severe and extreme weather, even not very far from us.

[11 : 27] And for all of these, the image in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* of always winter, but never Christmas, must seem very real. The waiting for some change for the better seems unimaginable.

But we hear in this story of Simeon and Anna, and the good news that Jesus' life, death and resurrection brought, does give us an imaginable future.

A future with him if we wait patiently, faithfully, obediently, prayerfully. Growing in relationship with him. Staying connected to Jesus.

The true vine. What are we doing here, we asked. Are we here because of an obedience to the call to join in collective worship regularly?

In some Christian denominations, being received into membership involves, among the other, the declarations of faith, the promise to be faithful in public and private worship.

[12 : 38] Why are we here? To go through the motions of worship? Is that even possible? To simply go through the motions of it?

Or are we here because our lives are focused on Jesus, and here, together, is one of the ways we express that focus by worshipping together? We are seeking him in every part of our lives.

So how do we do that privately? If we have busy lives, we may think that it's too difficult to fit Jesus in. But think again. If we don't, we miss out.

We stunt the growth of our relationship with him. If we have plenty of time, we can also be distracted into putting it off. But if we're not careful the day and the days pass, then we can still miss out, and again, our relationship doesn't grow.

Growth can be painful, but it is also necessary to flourish as Jesus' followers today, and to be able to bear the fruit that he expects of us.

[13 : 56] One of the great pluses of lockdown for me was the time and space to grow my relationship with Jesus. I determined then not to let things slip, but somehow it's never been quite the same in ordinary time, as it were, as it was in those months of limited movement and social interaction.

And yet, and yet, the joy of worshipping together took on a new impetus when we got back together. In all circumstances of our lives, we have to seek a pattern of worship, praying, maybe fasting, and Bible study that we can fully engage with and sustain with the support of brothers and sisters seeking to grow in their relationship with Jesus as we are.

That's what I'm doing here. That's why I belong to a home group. That's how I know I am part of the body of Christ. I would encourage you, if you or someone you know are beginning their journey with the Lord, perhaps as a result of something you or they have seen or heard in the various Christmas services, I would encourage you, encourage them to explore more.

Don't leave it unattended. Don't hesitate. Don't stop at simply hearing and momentarily reacting. Speak to someone here. Come for prayer after the service.

Think about signing up for the next Alpha course, which may not be for a few months, but keep that in your mind. Taking that step will be the best thing you could do going into 2024.

[15 : 38] Simeon knew his waiting was over in the fulfillment of God's promise when he saw the baby Jesus. He could let go and let God.

Anna knew her waiting was over when she saw the baby Jesus and that she now had to speak of what she had seen to those who were ready to hear. Their journeys continued in different directions, but they continued.

For Mary and Joseph, their life's journey was focused on their infant son as they nurtured him through childhood into manhood, having to negotiate various challenges along the way.

For us, living now and also in expectation of Christ's coming again, surely it has to be in patient, faithful, obedience to his teaching by encouraging and when necessary, challenging one another so that we are ready to meet him when he comes.

After all, life is all about Jesus. Amen.