



Luke 2:36–40

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to

the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Reflection

Today's passage comes from Luke chapter 2, verses 36 to 40. Let me read it to you now,

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after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

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Yesterday Simeon and today Anna. Two aged saints who represent Israel in min-

iature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the Temple, longing and hoping for the fulfilment of God's promises. And they, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, the law, the priesthood and the sacrificial system, are old, ready to move offstage, and to 'depart in peace'. God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping an old promise. As the resurrected Jesus will later to say to his disciples,

'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'

Simeon and Anna are a portrait of the Israel that accepted Jesus. Those who rejected him misunderstood their own tradition and therefore were not capable of recognizing him as the continuation of their own best memory and hope.

So yesterday, Simeon and today, Anna. She only appears in Luke's Gospel. But that isn't unusual. Luke transcends the first century's neglect of women. In Luke, the Gospel is for everyone, not only Jews, but also for Greeks – and Romans and Samaritans too. It isn't only for males, but also for females – and not simply important women like the wife of Herod's steward, but widows and cripples and prostitutes as well. Luke's Gospel has barely begun and already we've met Elizabeth, Mary and now Anna. Shortly we'll meet Hero-

dias, Peter's mother-in-law, the widow of Nain whose only son Jesus' raises from the dead, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus feet with perfume, Jairus' daughter and the woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, the widow who gave all she had, and the many women in Jesus' parables – women from all walks of life who encountered Jesus and were transformed.

Today we meet Anna who is not only a portrait of Israel in miniature, but a portrait of everything good about Israel. Just listen again to Luke's description of her,

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had

lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.

Luke gives Anna the rare and honoured title of prophetess. The title is only used two more times in the New Testament and places her in the illustrious company of only five women from the Old Testament: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Nodaiyah and Isaiah's wife. Anna is a vessel for revelation from God. She's from the tribe of Asher, a clan renowned for its beautiful daughters of which she is one. Her name means 'grace'. And Luke, who cares deeply for widows tell us far more about her than Simeon. The Greek is a little unclear – it

may be that Anna has been a widow for eight-four years, marrying young as was the custom, and married for seven years beforehand, this would make her very old indeed, perhaps 105 years of age. But whether 105 or 84, Anna is an exemplary woman of faith. Luke says,

She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.

Whenever the doors were open, she was there. In her male dominated culture without social welfare becoming a widow often meant destitution. But Anna was a woman who chose a lifetime of service to God over remarriage, an action highly regarded in the first-century religious community. The very best of Israel in miniature, Anna

affirms the prophecy of Simeon, God in his infinite wisdom ordaining that a woman, as well as a man, should testify that the Messiah has been born. Verse 38,

38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Mary and Joseph are still puzzling over Simeon's bittersweet words of prophecy when they become wrapped up in Anna's joyous praise. Immediately she begins prophesying to,

all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna pointed faithful Temple goers to Jesus; those who walked by faith and not by sight, those who had not succumbed to a blend of Roman and Jewish culture, but who lived in the ancient faith of the patriarchs and the prophets. Anna preached to those who longed for the coming Redeemer who would bring holiness and righteousness through his victory over sin and the devil. For such a Redeemer they waited patiently, and for such a victory they earnestly longed.

Think & Pray

There is much for us to learn from people like these but this morning I'd like us to return to Luke's remarkable portrait of Anna. Many of us fantasize and fastidiously plan for our retirement, like a twenty-year-long

holiday at the end of life – a house by the sea or up in the mountains, cruise ships and travel, fine dining, health and wellbeing, hobbies and individual pursuits. Anna's twilight years were very different.

Retirement offers so much potential for kingdom work. Finally, the time for meaningful relationships, deep friendships with grandchildren, neighbours, other retirees and people from all walks of life and backgrounds– all enabled by simply having the freedom and time for conversations and catch-ups. We imagine Anna, a regular fixture at the Temple, praying for, prophesying to and encouraging children, families, priests, foreigners, other widows, the poor and those in need. We imagine the impact she had on the lives and faith of so many of Israel's faithful. And when

the time came to tell them about Jesus, she knew them all, they knew and loved her, they respected her, trusted her, were used to confiding in her and so no doubt listened with rapt attention when she told them about Jesus. This can be our experience too in retirement if we model our twilight years on hers.

What will your retirement be like? You may have a financial plan but do you have a plan for your ministry in the longest twenty plus years of your life? Perhaps your career is progressing nicely. Is your faith progressing at the same pace? Is your growth in Christian maturity keeping pace with the growth in your professional skills? Are you on Anna's trajectory? Will you one day share her love for God and her heart for his people? If not, what can you change so

that your precious retirement years won't be frittered away but instead might be remembered fondly in heaven as the very best and most fruitful years of your life?

Pray today that God would continue to transform both you and I over the course of our lives, ever increasingly, into the image of Jesus. And pray that we would finish strongly. Pray for good health and adequate finances so that we would enjoy every moment of our retirement, joyfully leading and loving people into the kingdom of God.