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Service for the 1st Sunday after Christmas, 27th December 2020

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

INTRODUCTION

A word before we start, so that you know where I'm coming from. Being a singer, I have missed singing, especially at Christmas when I would have sung in Walsall Choral Society's Carol Concert, Broadway Church's Nine Lessons and Carols, with some of you at The Broadway pub and after at The Acorns; and also with the U3A singing group at its Christmas party. In one of the commentaries that I read about today's Gospel, it suggested that both Simeon and Anna *sang* in the temple – and I thought how wonderful that would have been. So when you hear the Gospel reading, try to think of them singing rather than saying the words.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us all here, young and old, be like Anna and Simeon – nurtured in the place of prayer, and looking to the world for the signs of God's presence.

Held together by this beloved truth, we turn together to worship the one who calls us all in prayer and practice towards the works of love.

HYMN: All creatures of our God and King

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1. All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing,
alleluia, alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
thou silver moon with softer gleam:
*O praise him, O praise him,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*
2. Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
ye clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, alleluia!
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice
ye lights of evening, find a voice:
3. Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for thy Lord to hear,
alleluia, alleluia!
Thou fire, so masterful and bright,
that givest us both warmth and light:
4. Dear mother earth, who day by day
Unfoldest blessings on the way,
O praise him, alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,
let them his glory also show:
5. All ye that are of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part,
O sing ye, alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God, and on him cast your care:
6. Let all things their creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness,
O praise him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One:
*O praise him, O praise him,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*

W H Draper

PRAYERS

Let us pray

As Mary and Joseph went on the pilgrimage of faith to Jerusalem, so we, too, have come on a pilgrimage of faith today, to this place of worship.

Meet us, O God, as we gather, and open our eyes to see the eternal truths all around us, calling us into love and more love and things that are everlasting.

We come with all we have – body, frailty, energy – and we approach you, who welcomes all, knowing that you sustain us at all ages, and in all ages, calling us to love.

The heavens and seas proclaim your glory, but we have polluted the skies and clogged the seas. Young and old together show the beauty of God, but we have made idols of youth and made age seem shameful. Forgive us, God, for our sins against the earth and our sins against each other.

We move – through age and aeons – in the one direction: towards your love. Forgive us, God, for making idols of the things that change, and ignoring what does not change.

You, God, are seen in the flourishing of nature – everywhere, everywhere, everywhere.

We thank you for farmers, fields and fruit. We thank you for sun and rain.

We honour this earth and its glorious creation, and the wisdom of nurture that has come from generations and generations of people who have tilled the earth – as you have told us.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING: St Luke 2: 22-40

The time came for Joseph and Mary to perform the ceremony of purification, as the Law of Moses commanded. So they took the child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord: "Every firstborn male is to be dedicated to the Lord." They also went to offer a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as required by the law of the Lord.

At that time there was a man named Simeon living in Jerusalem. He was a good, God-fearing man and was waiting for Israel to be saved. The Holy Spirit was with him and had assured him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's promised Messiah. Led by the Spirit, Simeon went into the Temple. When the parents brought the child Jesus into the Temple to do for him what the Law required, Simeon took the child in his arms and gave thanks to God: "Now, Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother were amazed at the things Simeon said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, "This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart."

There was a very old prophet, a widow named Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She had been married for only seven years and was now 84 years old. She never left the Temple; day and night she worshipped God, fasting and praying. That very same hour she arrived and gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free.

When Joseph and Mary had finished doing all that was required by the law of the Lord, they returned to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee. The child grew and became strong; he was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon him.

Thanks be to God.

ADDRESS: *Mr Geof Owen*

Sometimes, all we can do is sing

This past autumn we observed the 31st anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Sometimes on this anniversary there are reviews in the news media of the events leading up to, surrounding, and following that remarkable and largely unforeseen event.

One of the items that is routinely left out of these reviews, however, is the weeks of peaceful protests by the citizens of Leipzig that led up to the fall. Gathering on Monday evenings by candlelight around St Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – they would sing. Over two months, their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand: over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. Sometime after the fall, a journalist asked one of the commanders of the East German secret police why they hadn't crushed these protests like so many others. He replied, "We had no contingency plans for song."

Sometimes, all we can do is sing. Simeon knows that. Anna does as well. But, truth be told, we often forget about that in our world of images and noise and incessant talk. One way to approach this Sunday could have been to yield more of our gathered time to song, perhaps by either offering a briefer sermon or by introducing each carol with how it reflects the Christmas story and connects that story to our daily lives.

It would have been good to move in that direction simply because we have, in today's passage, another example of the power of song and prayer to create meaning, identity and courage in a way that words alone seldom can. Toward this end, let's recall briefly the setting of this story. According to Luke, it's now forty days after Jesus' birth. After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law. Now, thirty-two days later, his parents are again performing their duty as faithful Jews by returning to the Temple, this time in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord.

They must have been in a reverent, even solemn, mood that day: the way many young parents in our congregations can be when their first child is baptized. For this very reason they were perhaps startled – even frightened – when Simeon, old beyond years and beaming with ecstatic revelation, comes to them to touch the child and then begins to sing.

Note, however, that he's not singing of angels and mangers but rather of letting go, of departing, of – truth be told – dying. Why does Simeon offer this oddest of Christmas carols to the holy family? Because in the infant Jesus he has seen a sign and token that the Lord has kept the promises made to the Israelites of old and, trusting God's promises, is able to accept his own death with courage. It's a bit like us at Holy Communion. In that meal, like Simeon, we not only hear but also see, touch and feel the promise of life God makes to us. After receiving this promise from God in the bread and wine, we too are propelled to confident and courageous lives even in a world so marked by death and loss.

Anna sings next; but hers are not songs of death, rather of praise and thanksgiving. She too receives the Christ child as a sign that God keeps God's promises and all she can do is respond with thanksgiving.

This is a reminder to us not only of the power of song, but also that we are called to sing all kinds of songs. Perhaps on this Sunday, that would include our favourite carols; because, well, they are our favourites and have been the means by which we tell and share the Christmas story for years. "Hark the Herald Angels" and "Away in a Manger" are two that do just that for me. But we might also sing carols of praise – whether "Go Tell It On The Mountain" or "Angels From the Realms of Glory" – because such songs give us the chance to render thanksgiving, not perhaps as we ought but as we can, with joyful voice and uplifted heart.

But in addition to these favourites, might we also sing "In the Bleak Midwinter" by Christina Rossetti? Those words remind us that Christ came not only for the joyful but also for the despairing. God still comes amid the bleakness of our life and world, so it's helpful to remember that the holidays are for many a mixture of joy and regret, reunion and strife, hopes and disappointments, companionship and extreme loneliness – especially this year.

There will be some who have lost loved ones this year, or who struggle with depression, or can't find work, or despair over the bleak headlines of the news; or for all these reasons and more, desperately crave to hear their laments among the praise. They would take some measure of courage if they had had the chance to sing and be reminded that God comes to us precisely where we are broken.

Well, we know the carols you may *want* to sing, following the pattern of Simeon and Anna, that will best connect the Christmas story to the story of our lives. But if I might suggest just one more, it would be this: another hymn based upon a Christina Rossetti poem called "Love Came Down at Christmas." Because here, finally, is where Simeon's song of courage and death, and Anna's praise and thanksgiving – and all the other things we may feel just a few days after Christmas – come together. It is the wonder that God came down to us in the vulnerable flesh of Jesus to take on our lot and our life, that we might know of God's great love for us and all people and – knowing this – have hope.

Songs have power. Songs continue to create light and life. Songs give us hope and allow us to express what is deep inside us. Songs share the story of Jesus. Sometimes all we can do is sing, - and that's not a bad thing at all.

Let us hope that we can all sing again soon – and loudly!

PRAYERS

Let us pray

Today we honour Simeon and Anna. Old, both, they had a light that sustained them. They both held strongly to what they knew they hoped for. May we – people of all ages – be held together by what sustains us. Whether seven or seventy, may we know what is most important.

God in your mercy, hear us

Today we honour all shapes of families. Families by choice, families by adoption, families by birth, families in grief, families in multiple homes, families in negotiation, families in care, families in support. In all shapes of family, may we find words of love and kindness.

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HYMN: Through all the changing scenes

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1. Through all the changing scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.
2. Of his deliverance I will boast,
till all that are distressed
from mine example comfort take,
and soothe their griefs to rest.
3. O magnify the Lord with me,
with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called,
he to my rescue came.
4. The hosts of God encamped around
the dwellings of the just,
deliverance he affords to all
who on his succour trust.
5. O make but trial of his love;
experience will decide
how blest are they. and only they,
who in his truth confide.
6. Fear him, ye saints, and you will then
have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight,
your wants shall be his care.

N Tate and N Brady

BLESSING

Lord, your faithful servants Anna and Simeon had dreams and visions that sustained them into their old age. Enrich us all with visions and dreams that sustain us, from one decade to the next; so that our eyes might always be bright, with the life that we see all around.

Send us out, today and all days, with this love, and this vocation.

Amen.

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