

Hymns: **460** “Come, let us anew, our journey pursue”
 229 “Mary and Joseph came to the Temple”
 232 “Through long years of watchful waiting”
 549 “Come let us use the grace divine”
 503 “Love divine, all loves excelling”

Readings: **Luke 2:21-35**
 Luke 2:36-40

“DARBY AND JOAN”

Margaret Hazard, our oldest member, took down the Christmas Tree just two days ago. Christmas has only just gone. So I'm not ready yet to jump forward from the birth of Christ to today's lectionary reading which concerns his baptism. What's more, the lectionary appointed for "Covenant Sunday" is also a fatigue for me. Not the lesson itself – simply the fact that I've already preached on it well over a dozen times. So I'm sticking with the second chapter of St Luke's gospel and the story of two elderly people – an old man named Simeon and an even older woman called Anna. I'm calling them Darby and Joan but they're not husband and wife. They're simply two people who became archetypal figures in the Jerusalem temple. Always there. Always in prayer. Perpetually on the lookout for the promised Messiah.

Simeon and Anna have a walk-on part in the story of our salvation and, too often in my view, it's squeezed out by the haste with which we turn our back on Christmas.

They appear in a narrative that deals with routine ceremonial, a series of ritualistic events, which would have dominated the life of any family at the time of Jesus. First there was circumcision – a rite of initiation for all Jewish boys – and performed at home or in the local synagogue within eight days of the birth. Then there's "the redemption of the first born". For this, they have to take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem and present him there. It was an arcane sort of tax – a first born male was considered so precious and holy that he could only really belong to God. So the parents had to give him back to his maker. Over time, this strange happening was commuted into a money bargain and, after the due payment, the child was allowed to stay with his parents. Finally, again in the Jerusalem temple, the mother of the child was allowed, after a period where she was considered "unclean" to appear in public again. Once more a tax had to be paid – the poor person's tax in the case of Mary and Joseph, and Mary was able to take her part in society again. All this led to the Bar mitzvah of Jesus twelve years later and, if we'd had time, we could have read that in the very next verses of St Luke's gospel.

I emphasise all this because it was normal routine. These were everyday rituals. Everyone did it. Mary and Joseph fitted in with local cultural practice.

Why do I emphasise this so heavily? There's a simple reason. I wanted to be clear that Jesus was a good Jewish boy born into a good and observant Jewish family. He was being prepared to play his part in the ordinary life around him.

It's worth emphasising this in view of the way we have tended to make Jesus fit our cultural requirements. He's pictured as having blue eyes and long flaxen hair. He's described (even by our own Charles Wesley) as "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." He becomes the inspiration of armies and, under his cross, violent deeds are done. And, in iconography, he's commonly shown wearing golden robes and the paraphernalia of wealth.

For all those reasons, it's worth repeating that Jesus was a Jew, a poor Jew, an ordinary Jew.

Shortly I'll be visiting the Mar Thoma Church in India. It's an extraordinary body of Christians – a Church tracing its beginnings to the very first century of the Christian era. It describes itself thus:

- apostolic in origin;
- universal in nature;
- biblical in faith;
- evangelical in principle;
- ecumenical in outlook;
- oriental in worship;
- democratic in function;
- episcopal in character.

I mention this because of the simple fact that Christianity existed, there was a recognisable Church, there were significant numbers of followers of Jesus, in India before the faith came to Britain. We must, therefore, be very careful not to portray Christianity as having intrinsic and cultural origins here in our beloved land. It had already been out and about before we got it. And that should induce a kind of humility on our part. We need to recalibrate our faith, especially in these times when anti-Semitism and anti-immigration too often form an important part of the discourse of our contemporary age and provide the mood music for our day.

But back to Simeon and Anna. They were old and wizened, waiting and watching, eyes open – gosh, those eyes of Simeon. Once he'd spotted Jesus it was as if all the lights came on in the deepest part of his being. His dream had come true. He was over the moon. Now the great story of salvation could be told. I wish he'd said it all in the English of the Authorised Version rather than his native Aramaic. But here, in my favourite translation, is the song of Simeon:

*Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation
Which thou has prepared for all people,
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles
And to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

This man has been looking for such a long time. Contenders have come in their droves and gone home again. Will it, he wonders, ever happen? Will the desired day ever come to pass? And if it does, will I know, will I see, will I understand?

Well he came (Jesus that is), he saw (Simeon this time), and the message soon conquered the hearts of countless people. One came, another saw, and the message did the rest.

So Simeon, a Jew of the Jews, a man of the temple, turned out to be a man who was not trapped by his own culture though he was totally dedicated to it, not enclosed within his own language or political world view although he'd had little opportunity to see things from another angle. In his little song, he throws out any understanding of Jewish exceptionalism. This Messiah would certainly be the glory of his own people but would also be a light to lighten all peoples. He's quite simply able to see laterally where he might have been expected to do so in a much narrower focus. He understood, he a Jew proud of his Judaism, that Jesus was going to have a universal significance. That this event was being prepared for the good of all humanity.

Anna, meanwhile, was set on fire by everything she saw. Her old friend Simeon had a twinkle in his eye. This was enough to set her going. If she'd been an Eastender in London, a Cockney, she'd have sung that old music hall song "Knees up Mother Brown". She'd have thrown her skirt out, raised her knees and danced a merry dance. For the promise had come true. From the moment she realised the importance of that moment, she perked up. She began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. She was on fire with it all.

So Darby and Joan got the message. It came bubbling up from inside them, bursting out and overflowing their little souls. They were the vehicles to carry this message for the very first time. What a pair of old shiners they were!

Which brings me back to Alan Watts and Margaret Hazard who read our two scripture lessons this morning. They are father and mother figures for today's Wesley's Chapel. Like Simeon, they watched and they waited. They worked and they prayed.

Alan was deeply involved in the life of the Leysian Mission just along the road from us. It was his life. It was his love. But he knew that greater things would one day be in store. When the moment came, in Easter 1989, he was ready for it, never so engrossed in the activities of the place where he himself had grown up, to fail to recognise the importance of this new day.

And Margaret Hazard, our oldest member, who loved this place with a love almost indescribable. She'd seen it go downhill, closed for several years, its membership taken down almost to zero. But she went on hoping and praying. And, when, that new day dawned, she too was ready for it.

This watching and waiting for God's new future occupied so many of their years. But now, look at us; drawn from 55 different nations with two dozen languages other than English spoken by our people. Alive and excited to be here. All those dark days are gone. All that waiting and watching is over. A new day is truly ours.

As we come to renew our Covenant, let us pray:

- that the songs we are singing will come alive with the sound of music;
- that the prayers we offer will be infused with the Holy Spirit of God;
- that the bread and wine we receive will give us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet;
- that the promises we make, the resolutions we form, we may have the strength to keep;
- and that the Jesus we meet will open our eyes as he opened the eyes of Simeon, elicit our praise as he brought praise forth from the mouth of Anna, and show us the way, his way; release us from our bondage as we see and recognise God's salvation in him.

May this be the road we now travel.

Amen.