



28 December 2024

Christmas 1 (Luke 2.22-40)

**In the moment**

© Susanna Pain

Michael Leunig died just over a week ago now. He is sadly missed. He was truth teller, artist, poet, cartoonist, one with the rare gift of seeing below the surface, and telling it like it is, a bit like old Anna and Simeon. One of Leunig's Christmas offerings which we used in our Benedictus liturgy only last Saturday is also apt for today:

*Love is born  
with a dark and troubled face  
when hope is dead  
and in the most unlikely place.  
Love is born.  
Love is always born.*

So we gather today, with hope and love, only three days after Christmas and 40 days into the narrative of Luke's gospel.

We are now in the temple with a young couple: a teenage girl and an older man with their tiny newborn baby. Luke says they are doing what they need to do according to the laws and rituals- 'purification rites' and 'presenting the babe to God', but there's more going on here.

Luke has apparently taken the old idea of the first-born son being dedicated to God's service, but he prioritises the prophetic voice over the temple ritual. He alludes to the story of the prophet Samuel. When Hannah, who had no children, prayed to God for a son, she vowed that, if she had a son, she would give him to God for all his days (1 Samuel 1:11). And indeed, after Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple, and he was "lent" to God for life (1 Samuel 1:24-28). It is clear that Mary in Luke's gospel takes the role of Hannah (cf. Luke 1:46-55 with 1 Samuel 1:11; 2:1-10) while Jesus takes the role of the prophet Samuel (cf. Luke 2:40, 52 with 1 Samuel 2:26). Thus when Joseph and Mary present Jesus in Jerusalem, they are in effect dedicating his life to God.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus will be "holy to the Lord" says Luke (Luke 2:23). With these words Luke subtly alters the language of Exodus from a command to consecrate the first-born to God to a declaration about Jesus. Luke's wording is reminiscent of chapter one, where the angel Gabriel tells Mary that her son will be "holy" and will be called the "Son of God," because

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-luke-222-40-3>

he will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. The story sets the stage for Jesus' life dedicated fully to God (Luke 2:49).<sup>2</sup>

They're only poor they can't afford the bigger offerings for the purification of Mary, just something simple. Nervous I imagine, righteous I imagine, exhausted certainly, as any parents of a newborn might be. They were met by a blind older man who "sees" and asks to hold the child. He, 'was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him' we are told. Simeon, speaks words, surprising words, challenging words, cutting words, a blessing on this child but a wound for his mum. He's seen something in this ordinary baby this ordinary mother and father. He has seen something that he's been waiting for for years, and he blurts out the words of the song which we now call the *nunc dimittis*.

Beuchner imagines Simeon at the end of his waiting, holding the babe and saying 'Lord, now let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples', (Luke 2:29), the baby playing with the fringes of his beard. The parents were pleased as punch, and so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed.

What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. "A sword will pierce through your soul," he said (Luke 2:35).

He would rather have bitten off his tongue than said it, but in that holy place he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting.<sup>3</sup>

The end is never far from the beginning in this narrative.

Then, an older woman, a very old woman, Anna, arrives, 84 years old, quite old in those days, younger than some at Benedictus and older than many, a woman full of years, married for seven and then widowed. Identified by Luke not according to her husband's identity but according to her father's, "Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher" (v. 36), and with a social description that focuses on her own biography and virtues, not those of her father, husband, or possible children. Curiously, Luke tells us that Anna never left the temple. There she prayed and fasted. That a pious woman could have lived in the women's court of the temple (described by the Jewish historian Josephus in *The Jewish War*) is possible, but no other known examples attest to this. Her character focuses Luke's concerns about ascetic widowhood in the service of God. This has been understood as a

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-luke-222-40-3>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/11/2/simeon>

possible reference to the order of widows in the early church.<sup>4</sup> Luke gives voice to women in his narrative, here an older woman, and prophetess, Anna.

Anna too sees this young couple and their baby. She like Simeon, has been waiting so long for this moment. She too sings, and 'began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.' Wow!

How does Mary feel about this, do you think? She's been through a lot in the last 12 months and Joseph too, how is he feeling? And the baby, I imagine, is oblivious, though, we read, 'the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him'.

This is the end of the birth narratives in Luke's gospel. We don't hear anything about Jesus now until he's 12. His childhood proceeds outside the public eye.

Simeon and Anna have been waiting for ever for this moment and Mary and Joseph have to wait a long time now for this child to grow up. This little story may or may not have happened, but for Luke like the rest of his birth narrative it is giving a background, and setting up some expectations for his story. It's giving a hint of where we are going. He is trying to tell us who this baby will become. In all the birth narratives, we hold the ending of the story with the beginning.

I am with the young mother weary and excited. I am with this young couple and I'm with these old people, but I'm aware there is a lot of waiting in this story, waiting to get to this point and waiting for the unfolding of the mystery. We open our hearts to the gift of the present moment, to Christmas, and we also surrender, and open to mystery, to the presence of the Holy One in our dailiness. We listen for the cry of the baby. We watch for the response of his mother and his father, we hug the old man and the old woman and we hug the old man and the old woman within ourselves. We bless and are blessed.

'Slow down', by lamson was a favourite song of Ros Lam, in part, it says:  
'Slow down,  
where are you going?  
what's so important that can't wait?'

Only when you slow down can you notice more clearly what is happening around you, what is calling you, what is inviting you, only then can you hear the whisper of the Holy manifest sometimes in the birds of the air, sometimes in the trees, sometimes in an old man, an old woman, a young couple and a baby, and sometimes in the silence, but it may take a very long time. Sometimes, we can't hear God, especially when we're too busy, and God doesn't seem to be speaking to us. We feel alone, maybe depressed, but maybe if we

---

<sup>4</sup> VASILIKI LIMBERIS in *Women in scripture – a dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the apocryphal/due to canonical books, and the new Testament* by Carol Meyer's general Editor Toni Craven and Ross S Kramer associate Editors

reach out to those around us, maybe if we wait, the birds will chatter overhead and the fish will play in the pond and the cat will sit on my lap and I will know the presence of the divine, or someone will smile at me at the supermarket.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes

‘Above all, trust the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that it may take a very long time.’<sup>5</sup>

Anna and Simeon can attest to that.

John O’Donohue comments

‘this love is but a few inches away from you.

It is at the edge of your soul, but you have been blind to its presence.

We must remain attentive in order to be able to receive.’<sup>6</sup>

‘When a great moment knocks on the door of your life,  
it is often no louder than the beating of your heart,  
and it is very easy to miss it’.

says Boris Pasternak

Simeon and Anna, experienced this moment, they saw and spoke!

Love is always born.

---

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from ‘Patient Trust’ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/meditations/meditation-day-8/>