

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 7th February 2021

Are you waiting for that precious letter to arrive about your vaccination?

We have learned a lot about waiting these past twelve months. We have been waiting for life to get back to some kind of normal. We have been waiting for this nightmare to pass, and often the Lockdowns have been immensely trying.

And now we have some hope that the vaccines will make a huge difference. We hope that sometime Coronavirus will be over and we will get back to appreciating our families and friends even more; we will value gatherings – being in Church on Sunday mornings; the coffee and tea after the services; the Guild meetings; meals out with friends; school; birthday parties; weddings; having someone round to the house for a chat.

Hopefully physical contact can flourish again – we can hug and embrace and shake hands and kiss – and even show a warm smile lighting up our faces instead of being hidden behind a mask. We will enjoy face to face encounters so much.

We hope that the suffering and pain that so many folk have endured during this awful Pandemic will prompt us to be a more caring and generous society – where money and efficiency aren't all that really matter. The number of those who have died from this virus has shown clearly that our dealing with it has been shambolic.

And one thing that has been brought to light during this crisis is that the care of our elderly folk has been frightful. The news reports from Care Homes up and down the country were so horrendously upsetting – both staff and residents seemed to lack value and respect.

This past Tuesday, 2nd February, the Church celebrated Candlemas, the official end of Christmas, forty days after the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is on this day that Christians remember when Mary and Joseph brought their baby Son to be presented in the Temple to give thanks and they were met there by two elderly people, Simeon and Anna.

At a time when the Church is preoccupied on how it relates to young people, this is the opportunity to focus our attention on those of more advanced years.

Candlemas is a very ancient Christian festival, going back to the 6th century, when the Emperor Justinian I, responding to a horrible plague that had struck the city of Constantinople, ordered huge prayer processions through the city on this day, asking God for deliverance from the evil of this disease. The great crowds carried candles, symbols of Jesus as the "Light of the world". When the plague passed, the regular celebration of Candlemas spread throughout the Roman Empire.

In mediaeval Scotland, before the Reformation made Scottish religion arguably more Scriptural, and certainly a lot duller, the parish churches would have been ablaze with light on 2nd February. One of the good things about the Reformation, though, was that it reminded people not to get carried away with the symbolism and traditions and regard them as being more important than the Bible passage which they celebrated. The Word takes precedence over symbolism, but tradition too has a vital role to play in our Christian nurture.

St Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells this story of Mary and Joseph's visit to the Temple with the infant Christ, and it is only in this Gospel do we encounter both Simeon and Anna, both overjoyed to see for themselves the baby, the Saviour, for Whom they had been waiting and hoping.

Simeon and Anna are not mentioned in the Scriptures until they are past retirement age. They burst onto the scene in their Zimmer frames, announcing that the Baby before them would be the One to change the world.

Both of these old folk would be written off today as “past it”, yet it is they who tell to the whole Temple who Jesus is. Their age and their experience meant that they were able to see things that others couldn't. Looking back on their decades of life gave them both a long-term perspective of what God was doing in the world.

I wonder how much grief, hardship, and loneliness are hidden within the stories of Simeon and Anna?

I wonder how many prayers had been prayed?

I wonder was there ever a moment where giving up seemed the only option?

We are living today in a society where older folk are “written off”, “coffin dodgers”, but we worship a God who never writes people off for being too old.

We worship a God who called Abraham in his 90s; we follow a God who left Moses stewing for 40 years in exile in Sinai, before calling him to order Pharaoh to “let my people go!”.

Simeon and Anna were respected and treasured, a blessing, not a burden.

As they waited and worshipped around the Temple courts, year after year, they never gave up hope that they would see the fulfilment of God's promises. And they did.

Down through the good years and the bad times, they had never given up hope; they had avoided falling into the trap of just going along to the Temple and going through the motions and getting stuck in a religious rut. They stayed open to the Spirit of God working in their lives with every passing year.

And, in their advanced years, they saw salvation with their own eyes in that tiny Baby brought by His parents to the Temple that day long ago.

In the very obscurity and ordinariness of all that we do here in St Nicholas, the long, slow work of God is quietly unfolding too.

So, don't get fraught when the young ones are not coming through our doors in droves. Don't get downcast because faith seems to burn dim in our midst. Don't become negative and despondent because so much seems to conspire against us and it's the same folk who are keeping things running.

Our role is to keep hoping, keep praying; keep looking for God at work in our midst.

That Baby may have seemed like a very small candle in the darkness, a tiny sign, easily overlooked, just as we might cast our eyes over our winter world and just see the dull browns and greys at present, and miss out on the emerging snowdrops, whose other common name, incidentally, is “The Candlemas Bell.”

But to those who are on the lookout, no matter our age, as Simeon and Anna were, it was clear.

I, for one, thank God for all the “grey power” in congregations throughout Scotland – those who keep the precious flame burning in churches in villages, towns, and cities.

Friends, “old” is valuable; “old” is beautiful; “old” is authentic.

Simeon and Anna are witnesses to that.

For them, there was hope, there was light, no matter how dark the situation seemed.

Let that be our constant source of strength here.

The Reverend Fraser R Aitken Locum Minister