Growing old while staying young

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo to the Diocese of Guildford on 31st January 2021

**Psalm 24**

*7  Lift up your heads, O gates;  
      be lifted up, you everlasting doors;   
   and the King of glory shall come in.  
8  ‘Who is the King of glory?’   
   ‘The Lord, strong and mighty,  
      the Lord who is mighty in battle.’  
9  Lift up your heads, O gates;  
      be lifted up, you everlasting doors;   
   and the King of glory shall come in.  
10  ‘Who is this King of glory?’   
   ‘The Lord of hosts,  
      he is the King of glory.’*

**Luke 2:22-40**

*When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23(as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), 24and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’*

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.27Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,  
29 ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;  
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
31   which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’*

*And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’*

*There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, 37then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

*When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.*

I wonder who is your favourite character in the Bible. And now – well, since you asked! – let me tell you about my favourite character. He comes up every year at the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. He is Simeon. Simeon is like one of those gorgeous old folks who is always there for you – perhaps like an honorary grandparent. I was lucky enough to grow up with a few such figures in my wider family and among neighbours along the road. Simeon’s a kindly figure who is wise and prayerful, eyes glistening with hopefulness, and who is utterly utterly accepting and safe. I wonder if you know anyone like that? I hope so. Our church communities are functioning at their very very best when a young couple, who enter green and nervous with a brand new baby, are received and befriended and grounded and supported by people such as Simeon and Anna. They may arrive as strangers but they find themselves joining a story, discovering a new horizon and inheriting a family that they never leave.

Forgive me for a rather over-extended imagination about this old man Simeon: he’s my role model for growing old. Here he is in a favourite painting that hangs in a side chapel of Norwich cathedral. By John Opie dated 1791. Perhaps imitating Rembrandt’s portrayal, with the prophet Anna just behind him in the shadows, Simeon captivates me with his sense of honour, the sheer awe and wonder that he gets to hold this marvel of a child, that his eyes get to *see salvation* – it’s like you catch his surprise, you share his discovery, you can see it in his finger tips stretched out and tingling. In appearance here he’s some kind of cross between Santa Claus and Rowan Williams – overflowing with loving attention, with depth and wisdom, with gratitude. And fully present to this moment, a moment he knew would come yet which he’d been awaiting for decades. I don’t know but for some of you this might be like the moment when you got to hold your first grandchild, but magnified a thousand times.

Arguably Simeon is the first Christian, the first person to bear testimony to the person of Christ, the first to declare his salvation, at least according to Luke. Yet he remains a faithful Jew, he’s not baptised so far as we know. I imagine he continues to serve as a verger in the temple, keys jangling in his pocket, welcoming visitors, cleaning up after them and praying every moment of the way. He’s described as ‘righteous and devout’: which is to say he’s not one to rock the boat when it comes to living and upholding traditional faith. He’s not a radical like John the Baptist – he’d never move a service time or change the liturgy! - he’s more the safe keeper of the tradition, reciting the torah like an 8 o’clocker might recite the BCP. Certainly he knew the Scriptures – the Hebrew scriptures, what we’d now call the OT – because its from those scriptures that he understood what God had promised, the consolation of Israel, the end of exile, the arrival of the Messiah. He stands at the junction of time, quite literally, as the Old Testament ends and the New Testament begins, as BC turns to AD. As the past becomes the future. Because he spotted that God’s biggest promises had been woven together and brought to birth in this child.

But not every Jewish person inhabited those promises and lived as expectantly as Simeon. You don’t need to be young to be one who lives life on the balls of your feet, ready for God to break into the routine of every day with the promises of eternity. ‘Ready’ in the sense, continually, of being read set to go. Simeon’s life is shaped around the conviction that God has promised to transform fate into destiny, and that he’ll do that through the Messiah.

Let me just pause on the story of Simeon and ask how you’re doing in living life like that. Not only in lockdown it takes a spiritual workout equivalent to Joe Wicks or Madfit doing their daily physical workout, so you too are poised on the balls of your feet rehearsing the Scriptures and saying your prayers so that you live life in expectation of God’s actions, righting the wrongs of injustice, healing our desperate world, in bringing salvation. The trouble, sometimes, when we focus on the discipline of that is that the fitness can become an end in itself, even a dirge we inflict on others, rather than an opportunity, ensuring our focus is on God and whatever God may do. Ready for divine fulfilment.

When Simeon took the child in his arms, he knew his life was complete. And Israel’s life was complete. He praises God and voices words that echo the prophecy of Isaiah from about 500 years previously. Because some parts of Isaiah’s prophecy had already come true, most people skipped over the parts that had not. Ignore those bits, they’re crazy radical, they don’t fit with the world as we know it. But for Simeon the logic works the opposite way around: because some parts of Isaiah had come true, so we trust God and expect fulfilment of what remains and is *not yet* fulfilled. That includes the servant songs, those remarkable sections that speak of a mystery figure who, even though he suffers, will bring hope and healing, and not just to Israel but far beyond. It’s radical because there’s a universal horizon, which is to say that Israel’s Messiah will come *not just* for the consolation of Israel but as a light to enlighten all people everywhere.

At this point the faithful Israelite Simeon might not have been heard as so faithful. This doesn’t make for stability. He’s not protecting the past. Here’s a dangerous radical, saying things that could explode the identity of Israel and mess up its carefully re-established systems and structures. Don’t ever assume that because a person is old they are a stick-in-the-mud: not here! For Simeon tradition is the gift that shapes the new horizon. With confidence based on the promises of the past, his imagination is focused for what God might be doing in the future . That is to say, we look backwards, for the purpose of being resourced in what to expect going forwards. Tradition fuels innovation – they’re not opposites. Simeon may be an old man on the outside; but inside we discover his heart is young. He’s on his toes, supple and ever ready - just waiting for God to act, for change to come, for the future to happen. And here it does.

I wonder if you’ve worked out how to grow old as graciously as Simeon… and how you keep your heart supple, and young, and expectant: for that moment of clarity when you discern your prayers are being answered, that God is doing or saying something that really matters. I wonder – especially to those of you who think of yourself as *old* – if you’re prepared to step out and be the crazy radical one who is unafraid of change: harnessing the riches of tradition for the sake of informing innovation. And I wonder – to those of you who think of yourselves as *young* – you might draw on the wisdom and discernment of the older generation to see salvation, to discern how God is at work, and not least to ensure you NEVER underestimate the power and insight of those who know how to wait on the Lord and pray.

Simeon stands at the junction of OT and NT, not as the old guard but the doorkeeper to the new. Let’s call him a Pioneer Minister who plants a Fresh Expression. Even in his fading robes and carpet slippers, he demonstrates it is never too late to say ‘Yes’ to adventure, and to recognise the God of surprises. To point us to the light of the nations,

What surprise do you long for? A vaccine, yes, and for the science to keep ahead of the variants. An honorary grandparent, yes, and the safe space where there is welcome and wisdom and wonder. Or, above all, the sight of salvation, the concrete fulfilment of every promise of God, a new life that is tangible, that you can hold and hold out, a life that makes sense of every past life and brings hope to every wasting life and brings light to every dark corner in every nation.

Thanks to Simeon we too have eyes that see. And hands that hold. And hearts that flex. And hope that perseveres. All centred on Christ, who does not grow old. Rather, who makes all things new.