

# CANDLEMAS

31 January 2010

Simeon was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit rested on him. Anna was a widow of 84 and never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. It is these two characters who recognise and celebrate the significance of Mary and Joseph's child. As the introduction to our liturgy says, 'In their old age Simeon and Anna recognised Jesus as their Lord'. They had the wisdom and the insight in their old age to see the coming of the One who was longed for, the coming of the Messiah, Gods' anointed one.

It took them a lifetime of experience, of studying the Hebrew Scriptures, or worshipping in the Temple, praying and praising God, to reach this important moment in their lives. It was in their old age. Mind you although Anna was 84 and would have been thought very old, Simeon could have been by today's standards much younger. He could have been my age. And in his society he would have been considered an old man.

I remember when I visited a Roma community village on the edge of Novi Sad in Serbia a couple of years ago seeing a wizened old man walking very slowly down the 2 kilometre dirt track from the main road to the village and I remembered that we had met no older people in the village. I was told that this man at the age of 59 was the oldest person in the village. No one in that community, for various health reasons, lived into their late sixties.

We are fortunate that we live in a prosperous country with good health care provisions. Life expectancy has extended greatly over the last 2 or 3 generations. We are more likely to live longer and to have a better quality of life in our old age. Of course these are generalisations and there are always, sadly, exceptions where life is still shortened by an abrupt death in what seems the midst of life. But how is old age received? Does growing older give us greater wisdom and better insight into the human condition. I don't think that is necessarily true. The reality though is that we are in the middle of a grey-haired revolution. In the next generation or so there may be more retired people than people of working age. For some commentators the old will be too great a burden for the rest of society. Of course the retirement age of men and women will be raised. But some analysts would go further and argue that there should be voluntary euthanasia clinics for those who have had enough of living. This would be a very dangerous path to tread. It would undermine the basic principle of the sacredness of every human life and it would devalue the love and generosity that is generated through caring for the weak and vulnerable of every community. In an increasingly self-absorbed society, it is too easy to assume that my life is my own and what I do with it is up to me. We have forgotten that life is God given. It is a gift from God. Our humanity is not something to be disposed of, it is something to be nourished and developed and cherished.

How then are we to cope with living longer? Let us return to our gospel story, to Simeon and Anna, who in their old age had rejoiced to see the baby Jesus. They were people of faith, people who prayed. I am sure that some of their contemporaries would have said that they were very religious. They were always in the Temple praising God. But unlike some of their religious leaders who had become trapped by the outward practices of their faith, Simeon and Anna looked forward expectantly to what God was doing in their world and they welcomed it. As they grew older, the light of faith burned

brighter and helped them see what God in his great purpose was doing in their world.

Simeon and Anna saw in this little child in Mary's arms, hope, redemption, salvation not just for religious Jews, or the Jewish nation, but for all people. Here was a light to lighten the Gentiles. For Simeon and Anna, God was working his purpose out for all people. They might have been old. They might have had failing eyesight but their vision was very wide. Their hearts were open to the transforming power of the living God. Simeon and Anna were examples to us all both old and young alike. With the passing of the years the light of the love of God that was within them grew brighter. In old age they did not close in on themselves, they did not seek safety and security, they rejoiced at what was happening in God's world and at the birth of a child. They believed more strongly that the love of God would shine in their world for all people.

On this Candlemas, as we give thanks for the generous and open faith of Simeon and Anna, may these candles which burn all around us, remind us of the light that burns in our hearts and lives. It is the light of the love of God. As we nourish, cherish and develop our humanity under God, may that light burn brighter and may it shine through our words and actions.

Whatever age we are and however long we live, may we recognise with increasing clarity, the presence and love of God in Christ in the midst of our world. We are never too old to celebrate the love of God among us.