

Hebrews 2.14-18; Luke 2.22-40

Watching families bring their babies to the temple was one of the greatest joys of Anna's life. Not all families made that journey of course, it was quite the undertaking for parents with a new child. But seeing the pride and joy on their faces always made Anna emotional. The firstborn sons were so special, rightfully claimed by God and ritually bought back again by their parents - they would bring offerings in exchange for their son according to what they could afford, the poorer families making do with birds, the richer ones bringing larger animals. But no matter how wealthy the family, each one of these babies was the most precious gift they had ever received.

It always made Anna think of the story of Hannah in the scriptures. Hannah had wanted a baby for so long, praying and praying for years and years, before finally God blessed her with a son. Then Hannah had brought her long-awaited son to the temple and offered him to God. She had given the thing she had most wanted and waited for back to God, with the child, Samuel, growing up at the temple. He had become one of the greatest prophets in their history, anointing Israel's first king, and telling God's people God's word.

Anna had always tried to emulate Hannah, who had been so faithful in the face of sorrow. After all, God had rewarded Hannah most wonderfully, and perhaps he would reward Anna too for her years of faithful worship and service. So now, Anna loved to watch the families bring their children, their precious babies, as they too gave thanks for their gifts from God.

It was an unusual life, the one Anna found herself living, spending her days in the temple, praying, being in silence, being present with God, as close as she could get, but Anna found peace and fulfilment in this way. God spoke to her too, and she would speak her knowledge of God to others. As a girl she'd never imagined this. She'd thought she would have a normal life, getting married, having children. But her husband had died so quickly, and then she'd found her way into the temple. Found her way to being close to God, watching people follow God's commands, listening to God, and being called a prophet.

She wasn't the only one who spent all their time at the temple either. There were others, including Simeon. He knew God closely too, and for years he had been telling everyone that he had a special promise from God, that

he would see the coming of the Messiah in his lifetime. Now that was something extraordinary!

He was so sure of it, that he would see the promised one, that he would see God act in a new and dramatic way among them once again. Anna hoped that she might see it too when it happened. Perhaps a great warrior would come to the temple to pray or make a sacrifice, before going to overthrow the Romans. Maybe the priests would anoint someone who was especially devout, and who could lead the people into freedom. They had waited for so long, without being exactly sure what or who it was to look out for. But Simeon was sure. And it had to happen soon, because they weren't getting any younger!

Rousing herself from these reflections, Anna looked up at the groups of people moving through the temple courts. There was always a lot going on, and today was no exception. You could tell who was a regular, walking with confidence, knowing where to go and what to do, and who was here for the first time, or perhaps had only been once or twice before. Dusty sandals and travelling cloaks. Tired faces etched with relief at finally arriving. Some wanting to get down to business and fulfil whatever law or requirement had brought them to the

temple, others catching a sense of that nearness to God, a glimmer of awe and wonder as they paused.

Anna got up and was about to go and get some water, when she caught sight of Simeon. His face was almost glowing. He looked like he'd just seen a miracle, joy and hope almost bursting from him as he made his way quickly towards a young family. They had clearly travelled a little way to get here, and had a baby boy with them. They looked pretty ordinary to her. Curious, Anna began to make her way over to them. But before she got there, Simeon had reached out, eyes locked on this baby boy, and taken him into his arms. The young mother looked a little surprised, puzzled by this unexpected behaviour, and then Simeon began to sing.

His words spoke of the deep and ancient longing of the people of Israel, of their wait for the messiah, and of his own wait, his whole life long, to see the promised salvation. Was this it? Could this be the messiah, this ordinary looking child born to poor parents? How could it be?

But there was no mistaking the certainty on Simeon's face. God had promised him that he would see

salvation before he died, and here he was, not with a warrior or powerful person anointed by the priests, but with a baby and two baffled parents. This was it? Anna's heart was full as her mind raced. She should have known it wouldn't be what they expected. God so often (usually, in fact), spoke in strange ways and used unlooked for people to give messages or do his work. So God was going to be with them through a child. This child.

Simeon was speaking to the mother, who listened quietly with a serious face.

Anna walked up to them and laid a hand on the baby's soft head. God with them, right here, in this baby. Suddenly she knew that this was everything that people had been waiting for. Overcome with joy Anna turned and began to exclaim to everyone else in the temple that God had finally spoken, had heard their cries for redemption and salvation and freedom, that God was answering their prayers. The world was about to change, Anna knew.

That evening, after her prayers, Anna wondered what the future would be. What would the salvation look like? Who would the child grow up to be? How was God going to show power and might once again? Simeon

had sung of a revelation to the Gentiles. Perhaps this time peoples of all nations would turn to God. Wouldn't that be incredible, if all people could know the wonder of the true God the way she did, if God could be at the heart of life for those she had never even heard of. Perhaps this child was the start of a new relationship between God and people.

Anna smiled as she settled down to sleep. God had listened. God had heard. God was here.