

## CHRISTMAS AND BEYOND 2017:

### SIMEON AND ANNA: WAITING FOR JESUS

A deeper look at the characters, for those in the second half of life.

*Ideal for individual and group discussions.*

#### Introduction

A journey into the second half of life awaits us all. Not everybody goes there, even though all of us get older, and some of us get older than others. In the Bible there are many people who are called to great acts in older age, long after they thought they were even capable. God shows us time and again that age is not the problem, faithfulness of heart is all that matters.

Two such older people are Simeon and Anna whom we hear about in Luke's Gospel at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. So this reflection looks at their roles in identifying the Messiah and for whom a long life had been the preparation. To help us to do this we will explore both the Bible texts and an icon for the Feast Day that we celebrate on 2<sup>nd</sup> February.

*If you are part of a group, one person may like to light a candle to still everyone's thoughts. One or two people may wish to read the texts aloud to the group or all prefer to read in silence.*

#### Light and glory

When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception...

..... Now in Jerusalem there was a man called Simeon. He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to the restoration of Israel and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on Christ the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took him in his arms and blessed God; and he said:

*Now, Master, you are letting your servant go in peace  
 as you promised; for my eyes have seen the salvation  
 which you have made ready in the sight of the nations;  
 a light of revelation for the gentiles  
 and glory for your people of Israel.*

As the child's father and mother were wondering at the things that were being said about him, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Look he is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed and a sword will pierce through your soul too so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.

*Luke 2:21, 25 –35*

### A faithful widow

There was a prophetess, too, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. Her days of girlhood over, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old and never left the temple, serving God day and night with fasting and prayer. She came up just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem. *Luke 2: 36-38*



**Presentation of Christ in the Temple/Ss. Simeon & Anna**  
*Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese in North America.*

#### Who's who in the Icon?

**St. Joseph** - far left, elderly man with white hair and beard holding two turtle-doves as he was so poor.

**St. Anna the Prophetess** - second left, elderly woman wearing a red robe and white headscarf.

**Mary, Mother of Jesus** - middle, with hands held up to show the world the Christ-child.

**Christ-child** - right of the centre, as a baby in the arms of St. Simeon.

**St. Simeon** - extreme right, elderly man with white hair and beard holding Jesus.

**Red Curtain** - ajar shows the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the Temple.

**Sacred Scroll** - near to Simeon as he quotes from the Scriptures in his prophecy of the Messiah.

There are three ceremonies which take place on two distinct days in scripture. We tend to merge them all into one event, rather than seeing them separately, both in time and in ritual.

- a) The first is that of circumcision and usually took place where the family lived, and not at the Jerusalem Temple. It occurred on the eighth day after birth, as prescribed by the Law of Moses (Leviticus 12:3).
- b) The second is the presentation of the first-born son and this was also a requirement of the Law and by which the name of the child was given.
- c) The third was the purification of the Mother, required by the Law after the birth of a child. (Leviticus 12:6). Jesus would therefore have been six weeks old at the time of his presentation.

### Simeon sees salvation

It is the second ceremony, the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, which is most prominent in Luke's Gospel. It is here that Simeon and Anna witness to, and announce that the baby Jesus is God's Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

The Hebrew name for Jesus is *Jeshua* from two root words meaning 'the Lord' and 'to save' so Jesus means the *Lord is salvation*. Luke tells us that this name was given to Jesus formally at his circumcision rite in the Temple, and was therefore, one of the indications to Simeon that this child Jesus was the promised Messiah. So when he says that 'my eyes have seen the salvation' he literally means Jesus.

Simeon is a mysterious man. He appears out of nowhere. We do not know about his tribe, his family, was he married with children? What was his job? The only things we know are that he was a man of faith and hope, because he "looked for the consolation of Israel." This expression summarises the faith of the Old Testament saint in the promises of God concerning the restoration of Israel through the coming of her Messiah.

### Simeon was ready to die

It was the Holy Spirit who had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen God's Anointed One. It was the Holy Spirit that directed Simeon to the Temple on the particular day that Jesus' parents brought him to be presented to the Lord. Recognising Jesus to be the Messiah, this elderly man took the child in his arms and blessed God. After a lifetime of seeking the Messiah, one can hardly imagine this moment. A very patient old man who now held Christ in his frail arms. Simeon's words of praise express the deep joy that so totally completed his life. It is not surprising that he was now ready to die.

The salvation that Simeon saw, was not seen by him alone, but would be seen and shared by many. All Jerusalem knew of the Messiah which the Magi sought, but rather than to rejoice the people were "troubled" (Matthew 2:3). No-one from Jerusalem made the relatively easy trip to Bethlehem to see the child which was testified to by the star in the east. Yet while Simeon was a devout Jew, he did not view the Messiah's coming as only for the benefit of Israel. The Messiah was a "light of revelation to the Gentiles" - the Messiah came as God's salvation to all of humanity. This truth was taught in the Old Testament prophecies of a salvation for Gentiles as well as for Israel. That means all of us!

**Do we recognise God at work in unlikely people and places?**

**Do we have the faith to proclaim it no matter our age?**

Imagine the impact that Simeon had on Joseph and Mary. Perhaps in response to their amazed faces, Simeon went on to bless them, and to direct a very specific prophecy to Mary. Up to this point in time, all of the sayings relating to Jesus had been positive. Yet now, Simeon unveils the other side of the Old Testament prophecies, (Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53), prophecies of the rejection, crucifixion and death of Messiah, prophecies of his atonement. Simeon's prophecy views the coming of Christ as revealing the hearts of people, and of dividing people, so that because of him many will rise and many will fall. Simeon's words now prepare Mary for the grief she will suffer, as the world's rejection of her son will lead her to witness his death on the cross. Truly this will be a sword that will pierce her soul.

**Where have I found freedom of faith even when faced with sorrow and grief?**

### **Social Action**

**Who in your church has for years, humbly served the people without credit or reward? Thank them for their commitment and faith.**

### **Prayer**

God of our salvation,  
as I lift up my eyes to you  
and hold you in glory,  
like Simeon of old, I too will find peace at last.  
Amen

### **Anna's life of prayer and fasting**

Anna the Prophetess was married at 14 and widowed at 21. As a young widow, she could have remarried. She must have had many opportunities. As a member of the tribe of Asher, there was a strong incentive to marry and bear children, since this tribe was in danger of extinction as one of the ten "lost tribes" of Israel, which were scattered in the Assyrian captivity. This tribe was known for its beautiful people and skills that qualified them for royal and high priestly marriage. Yet Anna remained single, and lived out her long life in the Temple, occupied with prayer and fasting.

At the age of 72 tradition claims that Anna was made responsible for the care of Mary at the Temple from the day of her presentation there when she was three years old until her betrothal to Joseph. Having believed in the Old Testament prophecies all her life she was the only woman in the Temple to greet Jesus when it was time for his presentation. Anna proclaims Jesus as the redeemer of Jerusalem. Luke is the only Gospel that records Anna's role within the Christ narrative as Luke sees the correlation between the Temple's significance with the Messiah's fulfilment of the Temple's purpose – namely to worship God first in a physical place and then through Christ in a physical being. Unlike Simeon, Anna is not just visiting the Temple for the day; she is there all the time.

According to Luke, Anna “never left the Temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (Luke 2:37). Perhaps she was part of an order of widows who had specific religious functions in the Temple. Luke may also have seen Anna as the second witness in the Temple needed to validate Jesus’ significance. Deuteronomy 19:15 states the importance of having two witnesses to validate an event.

**What can we learn from the wisdom of Anna who inspires us with her faith and discipleship?**

### **Anna is a role model**

Anna lived in expectancy of the first advent, witnessing the Lord’s first coming in grace to bring us salvation through faith. As a prophetess Anna would have understood from the Old Testament that the “day of the Lord” was a day of divine judgment, and that the Messiah would come to deal with Israel’s sin. Thus, her prayer and fasting was evidence of her mourning for the sins of Israel.

Anna shows us that old age does not mean futility or uselessness; rather, that her experiences and maturity give credibility to a life of loyalty and expectation that reaches its fruition in the fulfilment of God’s prophetic promises. She is a role model for us all - not just for widows and older people, in how she made time for God, her constancy in accepting what God wanted from her and in the direction her life took. Anna was clearly diligent in faith, prayer and trust. Anna would have been a great listener and offered tender compassion to all those who came to her. She would have shown that God is the centre of her love and God would look after her needs and her hopes – that his presence was everything.

### **Social Action**

**What do we need to do in our parishes to see God at work in the oldest as well as the youngest?**

#### **Prayer**

God of widows, widowers and older people everywhere,  
may your son Jesus Christ turn our losses into gains.

Through prayerful and persevering hearts -  
may we find you in the inner temple of our faith.

Amen

### **Imagine the scene...**

These two elderly people hobbling along, probably holding onto each other for safety, see a small baby being carried through the courtyard. As they always worshipped at the temple, it was a scene they would have encountered many times. Yet, as Anna and Simeon look, they somehow know that this is God’s Chosen One – the One whom they had waited and hoped for all these years. They knew that this was the child that would make sense of all their hopes and longings. They didn’t know how. They just knew...

After they managed to catch their breath, Anna praised God and talked about what she had seen to the people about her. And as Simeon held the baby in his arms he sang a song of utter contentment – of hopes fulfilled and dreams come true. His wrinkled hands must

have been very tired as he held the child, but they trembled with a joy never known in all his life. In this tiny vulnerable baby, the child of a poor working class couple, Simeon and Anna immediately saw God at work.

### **What do you most look forward to as you grow older in faith?**

Being the first to hear something doesn't always mean being the first to understand its full implications. In Luke's birth narrative, Mary is the first to be told that Jesus will be the Messiah. Luke adds that she "treasures the words" the angel Gabriel speaks to her. Yet Mary is also puzzled by the divine message; she is "perplexed" when the angel greets her and must "ponder" the meaning of his words (Luke 1:29; 2:19). In this event, Mary's vocation contrasts with Simeon and Anna since her calling is both to be the mother of Jesus and to accompany him right through to his death and resurrection, whereas with Anna and Simeon, we see what it means to wait with faith, hope and expectation without a specific message from an angel.

Over the years, Simeon and Anna must have prayed countless prayers, hoped countless hopes, and suffered many disappointments. Now that their prayers are answered they could die in peace. What we see is a story of faithful serving and waiting – trusting in God's promises – never giving up, but keeping on hoping, looking forward to what God can do. We have the 'Annas' and 'Simeons' in our parishes – the quiet faithful ones who pray and care for our churches and people without reward. They remind us never to lose sight of what our faith can be. They are the signs of hope and faith to those of us who are too busy and too impatient to wait, and that it doesn't all depend on us – if we allow God to be present, something new and creative will be brought to birth.

### **What do you hope to give and receive within the life of your church?**

The pairing of Simeon and Anna reflects Luke's use of male-female parallels when he writes about people who receive divine blessing and salvation. Jesus' birth is framed by two stories— Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke 1 and Anna and Simeon in Luke 2. In both stories, the woman is portrayed as the more positive model of discipleship since it is the women who are more receptive to the divine message, and more willing to act upon it, with Elizabeth realising that her cousin Mary is carrying the Messiah and praising God for this amazing blessing and with Anna spreading the good news. We see two very old people with a six week old baby. This child is the symbol of hope, of a new start and new life, of a future full of possibilities. Looking backwards, Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises. Looking forwards, Jesus is the hope of the world, a light in the darkness.

### **How is growing older changing these days?**

**What do these changes mean in our parishes for our faith, worship, outreach and social justice?**

**How might Simeon and Anna give you renewed hope this Christmas and beyond?**

For additional resources in support of Catholic Bible Sunday please see:  
[www.catholicbiblesunday.org](http://www.catholicbiblesunday.org)