

Each of the four gospels offers a different perspective of important moments in Jesus' life. Together they help us paint a more comprehensive picture of who Jesus was and why his story is so important. Luke spends more time than the others on Jesus childhood. In this gospel, we have two examples - found nowhere else- that point to Jesus as a very remarkable young person. One is the familiar story of a return to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve - separated from his parents, only to be discovered "in his father's house", where he confounded, not only his parents, but the teachers and leaders in the temple.

The other instance greets us this morning - Jesus presented (according to the tradition of Moses) as the first male child of the marriage; dedicated to God, redeemed with the proper sacrifice. This otherwise ordinary occurrence draws the attention of two separate but similar people.

Simeon and Anna are related only by their devotion to God. Luke's gospel presents them as elderly, expectant, and faithful to a fault. Anna has spent the majority of her considerable widowhood in an attitude of 'fasting and prayer', and Simeon is described as "righteous and devout"; a man guided by the Spirit of God. Together they represent all that is good and hopeful and positive about the long-suffering people of God. For all they are advanced in years, their hope is fresh, their devotion is honest, and their hearts are open to the mystery

that is God's intervention. So their chance encounter with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph leaves quite an impression.

And it is a chance encounter.

It would not have been unusual for couples to present their male children in this manner, according to the law, and as habitual worshippers, Simeon and Anna would have seen countless infants come and go.

So what is it about Jesus that stirs Simeon to speak?
What changes that Anna cannot contain her praise?

The Spirit led them, says the gospel, and we are left to consider what that might mean, both for them and especially for us.

It is significant that these particular moments of revelation are given to people whose lives were dedicated to one thing.

Worship is the activity that unites Simeon and Anna; Worship is what allows them to discern the power of God in a powerless child. Worship is the path to an encounter with God, no matter what your friends may tell you... You know the ones I mean - those 'spiritual but not religious' folks who choose to worship on the golf course or in the mountains, or in any number of other 'glorious' locations.

These voices are no longer in the minority, and their opinions have influenced our approach to things that used to seem simple (and unassailable).

Even as the Christmas season fades from view, it is difficult to dismiss the feeling that there are still some conflicted opinions

regarding how we might capture (or how to best describe) “the true meaning of Christmas.”

A season of peace and goodwill? Certainly!

An opportunity to remember the love of God made flesh?

Absolutely!

And how best might we honour that meaning, and avail ourselves of that love?

Here is where the opinions differ.

Convinced as we are by the “spiritual but not religious” argument, we hang our hopes on family gatherings with extravagant meals and lavish gifts. We try to make new traditions meaningful, and look for ways to tell the Christmas story in new ways. The *act of worship* - becomes an afterthought in all of this.

This year we have had to think much differently about what worship looked like - how people might access services - all of our dearly held expectations were smashed on the shores of a public health disaster. Yes, we held services, but worshipers were mostly confined to their own spaces - these times of worship felt private and impersonal without the familiar surroundings, sounds and company of other faithful people. The question I’ve asked myself (and some of you) most often these last eight months has been “is it worshipful? Is it working as worship?

Is there worship in all of this?

I am, I confess, chastised by this morning's gospel lesson. I am humbled by the example of Anna and Simeon - two people who worship in the firm belief that they will see God at work. Their determined habit of worship allows them to heed the urging of the spirit. They are able to see remarkable things where others see only the mundane. Their hope is unquenchable.

It is always my intent to provide an atmosphere that encourages that sort of hope. I fail more often than I succeed - and at Christmas, most often - for at Christmas, our collective expectation defeats our best intentions. But now we find ourselves moving towards a new liturgical season, and so I claim a fresh start. Christmas is a season all its own (and today we find ourselves in the midst of it) and what follows is Epiphany; a time for the redemption of our expectations and the rebirth of our hope. For once we leave the snug safety of Bethlehem; the secret of God's great gift is left loose upon the wider world.

Prophet women and patient, old holy men - all these are given a gift that they did not expect. Simeon and Anna (and the magi, in their turn) teach us the wisdom of persistent, expectant worship. Those who long to see God will see God. Those who look forward to the consolation of Israel (indeed, of all God's people) will not be disappointed.

Not because their worship makes them worthy, or somehow more deserving, but because their habit of earnest, faithful worship prepares the senses to recognize a work of God when he happens along in his mother's arms.

It is this spirit, I think, that gave the authors of the Westminster Catechism the justification for their first (and greatest) question; what is our chief and highest purpose? The answer, of course, is to glorify God, and enjoy God forever.

And it is through our worship that we pursue this purpose - in season and out - that one day we too might catch a glimpse of God who is constantly revealing new hope to us and new life for us. Thanks be to God, that as we celebrate God's revelation to the world in Jesus, our hope is renewed and the promise of new life is once again made fresh and real for us.