

Welcome

Croeso i ddydd Sul Synod Cymru. Welcome to the first of our United Reformed Church Wales Synod Sundays. The idea grew from feedback at the October 2020 Synod Meeting where there were suggestions about more opportunities to connect people across the Synod. The suggestion of recording a service for when there is a fifth Sunday in the month came from a local church minister, and this is the fruit.

Some of us remember times when groups worked out services on paper to be circulated around the Synod for use on 'Second Sundays'. These videos seem appropriate to our times, to catch the need of the moment.

Sharing in this service reminds us of our different circles of belonging in the church: from local, to synod, to being part of the body of Christ through space and time. This service can be part of local church worship, shared as part of local on-line worship or viewed by households on the Synod YouTube channel. You can use all of it or part of it, but may it help us to give thanks to God and find energy for being partners in God's work in the world. May it help us to feel part of something beyond ourselves.

People from a different local congregation or pastorates will lead the worship each time and this time St David's Uniting Church is taking the lead. It happens to be the church where I am a member, so I will be leading some of the prayers later on, but now we hear our call to worship.

Simon Walkling

Call to Worship

Hymn

Sharing Good News

In the service, we refer to the 10 questions which we ask church members in all age time every so often in the hope that it encourages faith-sharing, helps us get to know each other more and guides us in our prayers for one other. The ten questions we use are:

- This time tomorrow, what will you be doing and how can we pray for you in that?
- If you could have dinner with one famous person, who would it be and why?
- What is your favourite book/passage from The Bible?
- What is your favourite holiday that you've ever been on?
- What impact does attending church services make on the rest of your week?
- Could you tell us something about yourself that very few people here know?
- What is your favourite memory of this church (or of its parent churches)?
- What is your favourite type of cheese?
- If you were asked to challenge/encourage us in one thing, what would it be?
- What is your favourite hymn/worship song? [Followed by singing it]

Prayers of Thanksgiving, Confession and Absolution

Song

Synod Sunday Sermon: Surprises, Solidarity & Salvation

We come, now, to our scripture reading for the day and seeing as this Tuesday is Candlemas - a day on which many of our Christians siblings across the world will mark the presentation of Christ in the Temple, we thought we would join them, just a little early, and so we head to Jerusalem and spot a young mother and her husband making their way to the Temple with their tiny baby.

I wonder what God will say to you through scripture today?

Reading: Luke 2:22-40

I know I'm not on my own in saying that there are some passages in scripture with which I struggle and others to which I'm instantly drawn. Well, Jesus' presentation in the Temple falls squarely in the latter. So far in Luke's account of things, we've heard songs from Mary and Zechariah, encountered shepherds and angels, welcomed Jesus into the world and now, some forty days later, this tiny babe born into squalor is brought to the big, bustling Temple in Jerusalem. As observant first century Jews, Joseph and Mary have made the journey to the city to present their child and offer a sacrifice as a symbol that he belonged to God. (Let's not dwell on the fact that this was only required for firstborn males for now and save the smashing of the patriarchy for another day!).

Whilst at the Temple, the holy family encounter two incredible prophets – Simeon and Anna – and it's as if Luke has replaced his winged, heavenly angels with far more Earthly and interesting ones! Essentially, Simeon and Anna saw Jesus for who he was and told everyone around them the good news.

First we hear of Simeon, 'a man in Jerusalem who was righteous and devout'. Look at any artistic depiction of this passage and you'll see Simeon depicted as an elderly man, usually stooped and sporting a beard of which any twenty-first century hipster would be proud. Maybe he was an older man – there's that bit about him departing, or dying, in peace once he's seen Jesus after all – but scripture doesn't actually specify his age so it's equally possible that he was a much younger man with less impressive facial hair. Whatever the case, we're told that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon; gave revelations to him; and guided him into the temple courts when the holy family arrived. It's here that he sees Jesus, takes him in his arms, praises God, and blesses the family.

Then Anna steps out of the shadows. Unlike Simeon, we're told that Anna was...well...I was always taught that it's rude to speak of a woman's age so let's just say that she would have been at the very front of the queue for a vaccine. We're also told that she's of the tribe of Asher – who generally lived in the north of the country so it's likely that Anna moved to Jerusalem to give her life to Temple worship, which fits with Luke's description that, she 'never left the Temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying'. Fair play to her! One day, then, Anna's going about her prayerful business when she sees these nervous new parents enter with their child. Anna walks over and glimpses something astounding about the child – so much so that she gives thanks to God and tells everyone looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem about the baby. Quite the day at the Temple!

Now it can be easy to romanticize characters such as Simeon and Anna and consign them to a bygone age of serene saints but I reckon the churches in our Synod have a few Simeons and Annas within them.

Take Simeon – Spirit-led, certainly, and maybe also a little over zealous in his actions. Just imagine Mary and Joseph coming to the Temple, overawed by its splendor, the promises of angels still ringing in their ears, inevitably sleep-deprived as all new parents are, shattered by their long journey, walking wearily inside and suddenly this stranger skips over and scoops up their baby, praising God and declaring odd blessings at them! Perhaps you have a Simeon or two at your church – someone who is devout and enthusiastic and a generally wonderful human being – but whom you might also have to remind to give newcomers a bit of space; that not all parents want strangers picking up their children; and – just one more thing Simeon – love the idea of blessing strangers, absolutely fab – but maybe lose the words about swords piercing souls in the future! May God bless those impetuous, Spirit-led members of our churches who remind us that God is still speaking today.

May God bless the patient, quietly faithful members, like Anna, too. I hope it's not wrong to admit that something of Anna reminds me of my Nan when she was in the early stages of dementia. 'Just look at how beautiful those flowers are', my Nan would say as we drove past an old roundabout I'd never paid any attention to before; or 'look at how red this strawberry is', she'd marvel whilst mine was already in my stomach. She would see things that others couldn't and, like Anna, she would point them out to anyone close by. I hope you know a few precious, perceptive Annas in your congregation – those faithful women and men who can glimpse the divine presence in people and places that others overlook.

All of which brings me to the three things that we might want to take away from this passage today. Well – it can't legally be a reformed refection without three takeaways, can it?! So we begin by attesting that God is a God of surprises. First century talk of the messiah was generally about military victories and a liberated land and yet when Simeon sees a poor couple offer the smallest of sacrifices as they present their baby at the Temple – a baby who would have been making all the usual sounds and smells that babies do – Simeon knows that he has seen the messiah – 'the light for revelation to the gentiles and the glory of Israel'. No one could have predicted the messiah coming like that! One might definitely say it was unprecedented! Our scriptures tell us time and time again that God does not work in ways which we might plan and predict but rather through surprising people, practices and places. That God transforms the world through poor babies, radical rabble-rousers, crucified criminals and Emmaus-bound strangers. God is a God of surprises – so may we not fear them, but seek God's presence within them.

God is also a God of solidarity. When philosophers and religious leaders were teaching that human flesh was defiled and dirty – something to overcome and certainly to be kept away from God – God decided to slip into our skin and move into the neighbourhood. That's the scandal of the incarnation – that the baby gurgling in the Temple that day was God incarnate....showing us once again that God doesn't love things by excluding them but by uniting with them! And so, just as Mary and Joseph took the Christ-child with them as they left the Temple and started on the long, hard road ahead of them; so, too, Christ is with us in the mess and the magnificence of our daily living. 'I will be with you til the end of the age', the child, then grown up, would tell his friends. Even in the darkest of our days, may we never forget that.

A God of surprises, of solidarity and of salvation. 'My eyes have seen your salvation', Simeon says, holding the forty day old Jesus in his arms – suggesting that salvation is perhaps more about who Jesus is, rather than what he does. But whatever our views about the hows and whos, in Christ, God saves us from a life

devoid of meaning and a world devoid of love. In Christ, God saves us from the stories that tell us that might is right, life is cheap, and only the fittest will survive. In Christ, God saves us from despair in life or fear of death for no situation is beyond hope, no place beyond transformation, no life beyond redemption with God.

So, after all that – it's like I said at the beginning. Simeon and Anna saw Jesus for who he was and told everyone around them the good news. May we now go and do likewise. Amen.

Some questions to help us reflect on today's Bible reading:

- Can you think of a Simeon or Anna in your congregation?
If so, how might you show them your gratitude and encouragement?
- Where have you seen the God of surprises at work in your life?
- What situation do you need to bring to the God of solidarity and salvation today?
- How will you share the good news of Christ with others this week?

Prayer of Intercession

Let us pray...

God who shows up to us and for us, we pray to you and to offer ourselves as answers to the prayers of others. We reflect on the presentation of Jesus in the temple as a prompt to our prayers.

We think of Joseph and Mary offering two doves – gift of poorer people, and we pray for those struggling to make ends meet. We pray for poorer countries lacking vaccines and technical treatments for seriously ill people.

We think of the baby Jesus, passed from loving parent to devout person praying your blessing, held safe in their arms – we pray for ourselves and all those who need to rest, held secure in love and blessing amidst risks of living.

We think of the reactions of Anna and Simeon and pray for babies who are growing at this time without seeing the smiles of strangers behind the masks.

We pray for elderly people waiting for vaccinations and those who are next in line.

We pray for family life and the family life expressed in the wider community of younger and older, couples and single and widowed, all lived out in a world of political tensions and economic inequality.

We think of the hope and the shadow of the sword of sadness in the words of Anna and Simeon. We think of the bittersweet mixture of life in all its ups and downs and all its fulness, and we pray about people we know who need our prayers.

We pray for those who grieve: who grieve for the loss of loved ones or over the state of the world.

We gather all these prayers in the pattern of prayer which Jesus gave us, praying together,

Our Father,

Who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us
and lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil
for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen

Hymn

Final Blessing

May God bless our eyes, so that we might glimpse the divine in surprising people and places.
May God bless our ears that we might hear the song of the Spirit around us and within us.
May God bless our bodies, minds and souls that we might share and show God's extravagant love with
everyone we meet today. And tomorrow. And every tomorrow. Amen.

Suggested Hymns: Cwm Rhondda, 10,000 reasons & The Sharp Winds of Change (see below)

The sharp winds of change are now sweeping our land-
It's you, God, we recognize your Spirit's hand;
She's waking our dull and outmoded old faith,
And nothing is certain or rigid or safe.

**Welcome God, welcome new, welcome Spirit again;
In your life, in your love, never one day the same;
We join, as your family, to work and adore,
Your great world to care for, enjoy and explore.**

We thank you for leading us right where we are,
For giving the courage to do and to dare,
For lifting our hearts when our feelings were low,
Your laughter to echo, your beauty to show.

Through many a torment and many an ill,
You've led us through valley and over the hill,
We've marked pleasant vistas and frightening scenes,
The country we long for will outshine our dreams.

Today you are with us, inspiring our song,
You bind us together to know we belong;
We welcome the sharp winds, disturbing our ways,
Sure sign of your Spirit, God- yours be the praise!

John Henson – used with permission but free to use

(Inspired by John Gwilym Jones 'Fe chwythodd yr awel..' and the tune 'To God be the glory' W.H.Doane)