

Sunday 3rd February
Reflective Worship – Waiting
Luke 2:22-40

Waiting isn't easy, whether it's waiting in the queue at the supermarket, waiting at the traffic lights or even waiting for Christmas. If we're not careful the time we spend waiting becomes wasted time - we look at our watch, bite our nails or count the days, and we concentrate on what is going to happen rather than what is happening now. We live for the future rather than the present.

And I think I'm right in saying that the aversion we have with waiting is getting stronger. The more 'instant' our lives become, the less we want to wait for anything. And it's easy to see how our lives are becoming more instant. Fast food and ready meals take away the need to prepare and cook food; All too easily available credit takes away the need to save up for things we wish to buy; emails and online message apps take away the need to post letters and wait for replies; online shopping and home delivery takes away the need to wait and queue in shops. And much, much more besides.

I'm reminded of the delightful character of Veruca Salt in Charlie and the Chocolate factory and her mantra of "I want it now".

Perhaps the aversion we have for waiting has something to do with always wanting to be in control. When we are waiting, we have to accept that we are often waiting for someone else to do something or something to happen that we don't have direct control over - and that it may not happen when we want it. And again, perhaps this constant desire to be in control is more prevalent today in a culture that is so centred around what's best for me.

So, given that we can't control everything, and that we certainly can't control how long we wait for things, why don't we try to use the waiting time in some way, rather than simply getting frustrated at the delay? Depending on what the wait is for, and how long it is, we could put our energies into what is happening now around us rather than simply anticipating what will happen when the wait is over; we could enjoy the stillness and the not doing anything; ponder on what the important things in life are for us; listen to what is being said to us through the waiting; pray for those who need our prayers or simply enjoy being in God's presence.

Today we are celebrating the festival of Candlemas – or the Presentation of Christ. We remember not only Mary and Joseph’s offerings for purification and the redemption of their first born son, but also their curious encounters with and messages from Simeon and Anna.

Simeon and Anna who had both been waiting for the Messiah.

Of course, they weren’t the only people in Israel who were waiting. In some ways the whole Jewish nation was waiting. The last prophets had been hundreds of years before. They had brought prophecies of a coming Messiah who would restore the fortunes of Israel; who would bring (as we read in the reading from Luke’s gospel) the consolation of Israel and redemption of Jerusalem – in other words they were waiting for God to act in a decisive and visible way, waiting to see the long promised Messiah who would, they assumed, bring freedom from the Roman oppression. Yes, they were waiting in one sense, but it all made little difference to how they lived now. The hope of the Messiah was perhaps as we often understand hope today – something that would be nice if it happened, but that we can’t be certain about and that it’s not worth spending the time thinking too much about.

But for Simeon and Anna the waiting became the whole purpose of their lives.

Simeon was, we read, devout. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would see God act – see the long promised Messiah - before he died. And that same Spirit led him to the temple on that day when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus in. We can imagine a man of prayer, in tune with God, able to listen and hear the words of God. Someone for who the waiting time was a time of devotion and prayer and listening to God, but primarily hope.

Anna, we read, was constantly in the temple, worshipping and praying. She too was listening to God and ready to act on what he told her. She was, like Simeon, hoping and praying and waiting for God to act. She was waiting with God for God to act.

And hope for them was the kind of hope that Paul and others talk about in the Bible. Certain hope. It will happen – of that there is no doubt – but the timing is God’s timing. For Simeon and Anna, their calling was to wait for God to act – not if but when.

We all too often see waiting time as a kind of limbo time – a transition between the past and the future, where the focus of thought and hope is on the future. We wait through the present because we want to live the future.

But that wasn't the case for Simeon. He had waited. Day by day he had waited. Waited and prayed and listened. And now he had heard God speak. The waiting period was coming to an end. This baby before him was the one; the one who would grow up to be the Messiah, the Saviour, the hope and consolation of Israel. The long awaited Messiah.

But he knew it wasn't in his gift to be part of the Messiah's mission. His wait wasn't a wait to be involved, but a wait to see it begin. He would never live in the future that he had so long hoped for. He knew that his part in all this was waiting; was praying; was longing. And once the waiting was over, his part in the plan would be over too. Simeon's purpose was in the waiting. And I think it's fair to assume that the same was true for Anna.

It reminds me of Moses. Leading the nation of Israel through the wilderness wanderings for 40 years; hoping for the promised land; certain that God would lead them there and establish them there, but knowing it was not in his gift to enjoy living in the land – just to glimpse it and see the beginnings of the promise being fulfilled.

Sometimes the waiting time can be a long time. For Moses 40 years; for Simeon and Anna many years (we don't know how many); for the nation maybe 400 years. And when it becomes a long time, perhaps it's all too easy to slip into the 'it will never happen' mindset; for the hope to lose its certainty and become just a vague possibility – and probably one that will never happen; for the waiting to become futile. Hope then needs to be certain hope and to be held on to; the promises of God need to be written firmly on hearts and the waiting time needs to become about more active listening and praying.

But of course there are times when waiting takes on a different perspective. Waiting for something we don't want to happen. We know a family who had a daughter with a life limiting condition. It was a miracle she was alive at all. But hanging over the whole family was the certainty that she would die; that there was no possibility of her growing and developing and realising her full potential. Their lives became lives of waiting for her death.

And at times like that – and we often hear this from people with terminal illnesses – every day becomes a day to be lived; a day to be enjoyed; a day to use; a day to be loved and to show love. The waiting time becomes the living time; and the praying becomes praying that something might not happen – or at least not yet and praying for strength to cope.

So what are you waiting for?

In your life ..

In the lives of those you love..

In the life of the church – perhaps especially as we think today of how our churches might grow and develop, and how the faith of us as church members might grow and deepen

Or in the world around us

How are we waiting

Impatiently, with hope, with sadness, with expectation, attentively or sporadically, with excitement or despair

And where is God in our waiting

Questions and thoughts to ponder which we'll do in a moment with some prompt cards

But first I will read a poem by R S Thomas

Then silence; then I invite you to light a candle or candles for those things you are waiting for. As we do this we'll sing the taize chant

There is a poem by R S Thomas

*Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*