

Trust and hold fast to what God has set before us

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Early in today's Gospel reading, Luke reminds us of two Jewish customs of his time. First, for the forty days after a Hebrew woman gave birth to a boy, she was viewed as being ritually unclean. At the end of that time, Jewish Law ^{Lev 12} required that she present an offering for her purification. ...The other custom looked back to the escape from Egypt. In Exodus 13, we read that every firstborn of the Hebrews was to be dedicated to God. This law softened as the *ordained* service of God came to be the province of tribe of Levi alone, so parents belonging to the other tribes could dedicate their firstborn, but also redeem them. At the temple, they'd make an offering which ritually bought back their firstborn from God.

So today, Luke shows the Holy Family coming to the temple for purification and for this ritual acknowledgement of God's first call on their child. But Simeon and Anna appear and declare that despite the ritual buy-back, they've been waiting there to hand on God's call from themselves to this family. Simeon's lovely words embody this sense of handing on the baton as he takes the little Jesus in his arms:

²⁹ Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

A light for revelation to the Gentiles – the light of God's

glory offered to everyone. What it means is that everything which the temple had embodied now lies cradled in the arms of Simeon, a faithful old man who held on to the truth. And then the ancient prophet Anna, who also came at that moment *began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

Simeon and Anna had lived very long lives of faithful service to God. They saw God as prophets do; they see *in real time* what God is doing. They saw God handing on the Glory which had dwelt in the temple, and entrusting it to a six-week old baby who would shine with that glory for the whole world to see. For Simeon and for Anna, this was at once a moment of exultation and one of release. They could let go; they could die in peace; someone else would carry the load from now.

This Song of Simeon is called *the night-prayer of his life* and remains the Church's night-prayer of handing over to God the troubles of each day.

Of course, the message to those who cradled the new temple of God's Glory was not all rosy. *Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed* ³⁵ *so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'* This story holds a special place in part of the Church's year where we find ourselves right now. The seasons of Christmas and Epiphany are visible, firstly in the Child, and also in the promised revelation to all peoples. But even now, the suffering of the Cross begins to come into distant focus.

The falling and the rising, the opposition, the exposure and the agony that Simeon foresees for Mary – these are very much part of our experience of holding on to faith too; they describe our predicament and our blessing. Yet Simeon and Anna, knowing this about life, nevertheless proclaim revelation and understanding.

Our own parish embodies everything we read in this story. We have faithful seers and servants who have been holding on to the faith here for a very long time. You each received the faith from your forebears, and by God's grace, you have borne the light aloft here for many years. We who now share the burden with you faithful mothers and fathers of our church must go on holding the light aloft in an ever-different world. What do you see ahead of us? What can you tell us?

As you hand on the faith to us, and we to succeeding generations, we make Simeon's song a prayer for ourselves. And we pray that when we hand over the light of faith to those who come after us, we hand it over to people whom we've enabled to hold it aloft too; by God's grace, people whom we've enabled to hold aloft the light of faith for a long and complex lifetime.

Little people like you and me – we're involved in God's purposes, and no matter if we don't see *results* sometimes for many years, we shouldn't be discouraged. Things might seem out of control at a national or international level, but God still works through us little people to bring about grace, love, peace, hope, joy, justice, mercy and faith. Our part in this is to trust and hold fast to what God has set before us; practise the faith, do justly, rejoice, exult in God. *For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

Isa 61.11 Amen