

**Brackenhurst 28 December 2008 all day  
Holding the Baby**

**Welcome and Call to Worship (Is 56:1-2):**

This is what the LORD, Yahweh, says:

“Maintain justice  
and do what is right,  
for my salvation is close at hand  
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.  
Blessed is the one who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,  
and keeps his hands from doing any evil.”

**Opening Prayer**

Lord, we joyfully come to you this morning remembering that we celebrated your birth just a few days ago.

- A birth that turned the world on its head
- that brought light into darkness
- \* and made a way for us to be your children and your heirs.

We pray that as we gather we will remember that you are with us, not only today, but always

- That you walk alongside of us
- you guide us and you teach us
- And that all that you have, is ours.

Teach us to be aware of your presence with us always

- but especially now as we gather in your name to worship you

As we gather to proclaim the truth that the Lord is come,

- that the Saviour reigns
- and that he does, indeed, rule the world with truth and grace

Amen

- Hymn 77 — Joy to the World

**Welcome & Notices**

**Prayer of Adoration and Confession**

- Hymn 685 — O love that wilt not let me Go

**Offering  
Prayer**

## Scripture:

Luke 2:22-40

- Hymn 74 — At the name of Jesus

## Message

### INTRODUCTION

- One of the things that I realised very early on in life
  - In my house, anyway — and you will know that my family haven't ever cared much for religion
    - \* Perhaps it is different in your homes
- but one of the things that I realised is that Christmas doesn't last very long!
  - There's this tremendous build up to Christmas day
    - \* To the opening of the presents
    - \* To the meal
    - \* To the visits with family and friends
- But really, and again this was in my home, but by the time guests had left on Christmas afternoon, by the time the presents had been opened and the batteries gotten flat
  - All that was left of Christmas were a few broken bits of snack leftovers lying in the crisp bowls
    - \* And piles of dirty dishes
- We have this amazing build up that lasts weeks as we journey through Advent
  - And we fill ourselves on a sense of expectation of this event which is to come
    - \* But it is soon over
- And I think many times we do the same in the church — huge build up, and then it's all over
  - By the Sunday after Christmas we've done the Christmas thing!
    - \* We've done the carols
    - \* We've done our bit for charity — gifts
    - \* We've had Christmas day services
- And now everything is back to normal
  - And yet, and yet the Jesus story is only just beginning!
- The Jesus story doesn't stop on Christmas morning.
  - Maybe the reason we think that is because we don't see a lot of Jesus growing up
- We celebrate his birth and then before we know it we're in Lent and Easter.
  - And with Jesus in the wilderness 30 years later

- So the challenge that I want to offer this morning
  - This dead time of the year
- is to say let's look at how we can stop Christmas ending on Christmas day
  - at how to keep the batteries in the Christmas story fresh
    - \* And I think that as we look at the story of Simeon and Anna in the temple as Jesus is brought to be dedicated
    - \* We can see some measure of how to do that
- And as I look at the story, and particularly the characters in the story I see in them three qualities that we would do well to cultivate in our lives
  - To keep the Christmas spirit alive all year round
    - \* An air of anticipation
    - \* A devotion to duty
    - \* A sense of the Spirit

### **(1) Air of Anticipation**

- One of the things that characterises Christmas, for me anyway, is the air of expectation and anticipation
  - Maybe that stems from a being child and waiting with great excitement for Christmas present
- but I think that there is more to it than that
  - There is a sense of being excited about what God has done through Jesus Christ
    - \* And being able to celebrate that and share in that
- And so as we look at the characters in our story this morning the first thing that stands out for me was that they had an air of anticipation
- Not only Simeon and Anna, but also, of course, Mary and Joseph
  - From the moment the angel appeared to the both of them
    - \* To Mary promising the birth of Jesus (Lk 1:26ff)
    - \* And to Joseph in a dream (Mt 1:20ff)
  - There was an air of anticipation, I guess as there is with any parents of an expected child
- And then there is the air of anticipation that Simeon lives with:
  - He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and it had been revealed to him that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ
    - \* That must have been a strange situation to be in
  - To be getting older and older and yet knowing that before you die you will see the Christ
    - \* he lived with an air of anticipation

- And then of course the prophetess Anna, the daughter of Phanuel
  - Living a lifestyle of prayer and fasting and being able to tell, as she saw the infant Jesus, that this was the one who would bring redemption.
    - \* He was the one people were looking forward to
- The story is told of two ministers who happen to be moving into a new town
  - And the first drives into the town and stops at a garage on the outskirts and as he stops the owner, seeing that he has a car and trailer full of belongings starts a conversation with him
    - \* And so the minister asks the man what are the people in town like and the owner replies
      - “Well, what were they like in the town you’ve just left?”
    - Oh, he says, they were a wonderful congregation: loving, giving, kind, generous, willing to get involved — just like the people of Brackenhurst — and I’m really so sorry to be leaving there.
      - \* The owner replies, “I think you’ll find that the people in this town are very similar”
    - A while later the other minister stops at the garage and has a similar conversation
    - And what, he says, are the people in this town like?
      - \* And the owner says, what were the people like in your previous congregation.
    - He says, “oh, they were awful. They didn’t do a thing themselves, getting money out of them was like getting blood out of a stone, they were stingy, gossips and I’m so glad to see the back of them.”
      - \* The owner replied, “I think you’ll find that the people of this town are very similar”
- Our own attitudes, very often, determine how we see and understand life.
  - If we get to the 26 December and see Christmas and the Christmas story as being over, it will be
- But if we approach every day and every person with an air of anticipation and excitement as to how we are going to encounter Christ,
- An air of anticipation of what is waiting for us
  - I think we’re going to see him more often than not
    - \* And we’ll begin to discover the Christmas spirit in our lives more than in just Advent

## **(2) Devotion to Duty**

- Secondly, in the characters in the story we see a devotion to duty

- Duty is a word that is filled with negative connotations, I think.
  - When there is something that we have to do that we don't like to do we may do it because it's our duty.
    - \* If you have an aged aunt in the Old Age home you visit her because it's your duty to do that
    - \* It's your duty to do national service
- And it's become a negative word in the church as well — we don't like to think that we're bound by duty
  - We say if we're not gifted to do something we don't have to do it
    - \* We've ceased to be a people to do their duty
- Because very often when we think of duty we think of law and commandments
  - Those things we don't like to do because they are painful or frustrating
    - \* or impede our sense of freedom
- And that's where we get our meaning as Christians: We are free!
  - It is for freedom that Christ has set us free — Gal 5:1, Hallelujah, praise the Lord
    - \* Set free of traditions
    - \* Set free of religious practices
  - We have been saved by grace through faith, we don't have to do work to earn our salvation
- We are free! So there's a whole lot of stuff that we don't have to do — even though we should
  - And that's quite true
    - \* We are free from ritual and tradition and law
- But Christians through the ages have also discovered that in duties and ritual — which you don't have to perform to be saved — in duties and rituals a depth to Christianity is uncovered that may otherwise pass unnoticed
  - As I look at the example of Simeon and Anna there is in their lives a devotion to duty that allows them the gift of seeing the Christ child
    - \* Of seeing the salvation which has been prepared for all people
    - \* Of being able to give thanks for the one who would bring redemption
- Simeon is described as being righteous and devout.
  - He was clearly an old man, waiting for the promised one, and ready to die now that he had seen him
  - And it seems that his life was consumed by a faithfulness to God in which he walked with the Spirit
    - \* In which he worshipped regularly
    - \* with the purpose simply of awaiting the promised Messiah

- And then Anna — a widow of 84
  - We are told that she never left the temple, but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying
- And even Mary and Joseph were devout in their duty of raising Jesus
  - Naming him as they had been commanded to
  - Fulfilling the duties that the law required — bringing him to be circumcised
  - Going through the rituals of purification
    - \* For Mary that would have been 40 days after his birth
  - And consecrating him to God, offering the sacrifices that were required
- It was in the completion of these duties that they discovered the depths of who the child Jesus really was
  - If we don't want Christmas to pass as an anticlimax, I believe that we need to be reminded of and encouraged to be devoted to our duties as Christians
    - \* Sure — our salvation doesn't depend on it
- But in doing duty we discover a depth to our faith that might otherwise pass unnoticed
  - And I think that all of us can benefit from that
- Doing the duties of church attendance, daily devotions, of worship, of prayer, of building the rhythms of Christianity into our daily lives
  - the duties of doing the things that we don't really enjoy doing for the greater good
- And the thing that strikes me about this story is that none of the characters had to go very far to do their duty
  - Duty doesn't mean going on an overseas mission
- But they simply kept doing what they were doing, called to do, where they were doing it, didn't have to go searching
  - So in order to do your duty it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to do something different in new year, maybe it simply means faithfully keeping on where you are with air of anticipation
    - \* And allowing God to surprise you.

### **(3) Sense of the Spirit**

- And then thirdly, the characters in the story all had a sense of the Spirit, and the work that the Spirit was going to do.
  - Certainly, Luke's gospel promotes the work of the Spirit
    - \* It was the Holy Spirit through whom Mary fell pregnant
    - \* It was the Spirit who revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Anointed One

- \* And and who moved him to go down to the temple courts when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be consecrated.
- I want you to notice this because very often there seems to be battle between people who claim to be led by the Spirit and people who operated according to regulations, traditions, and duty
  - And some people will say being bound by tradition prevents the Holy Spirit from working
    - \* And others will say “we have to have structure otherwise everything falls apart.”
- In this passage that we’re looking at today it is within the structure and discipline of the law and duty that the Holy Spirit operates.
  - The two work together to create a place where the Christ is revealed
- The devotion to duty brings about a depth in one’s faith that allows the full expression of the Holy Spirit
  - And it is this sense of the Spirit at work — within the duties of their faith
    - \* That allows Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to fulfil the requirements of the Law
    - \* And Simeon and Anna living a life of devotion
  - to see the Christ child
- If we are going to live with excitement of the Christmas Spirit all year long we have to allow our duties and the Holy Spirit to work in synergy with one another
  - If we simply concentrate on our duties they are going to get dry and boring and repetitive
    - \* And we’re very quickly going to become bored
- If we simply rely on the Spirit to lead us randomly from day to day our faith is forever going to be shallow and ultimately meaningless
  - Can I suggest, therefore, that as you approach this new year that you take an honest look at your faith?
- Look at how much of the role ritual plays in your journey
  - for good and for bad
    - \* Maybe you need to be more intentional in structuring quiet times, and in doing things that you’re not so comfortable doing
    - \* Or maybe you need to break away from some of the rituals that you have become too comfortable with and try something new
- And look at how you allow the Spirit to guide you
  - Are you using the Holy Spirit as an excuse to avoid a deeper faith journey
    - \* To avoid making a commitment that you should be making to a duty you’re trying to avoid

- Or perhaps you're brushing the Spirit off as being something for the Pentecostals to focus on
  - \* being too comfortable in rituals that you've practised for years
- Can I encourage you this year to look for the Spirit, and get a sense of how he is leading you to grow and experience the presence of the Christ child all through the year?

## CONCLUSION

- Let me conclude
- You may have realised that what we've been speaking about are also qualities that people need to be good parents
  - When the actual moment of giving birth has passed, it's not a case of okay, that's it, it's over
- The anticipation of the birth may have passed but there is still the excitement and anticipation of watching the child grow
  - And of the different milestones on the child's life
    - \* And of who the child is going to become, and career choice, and marriage
- Your devotion as a parent doesn't stop when the child is born
  - Some animals are like that — they lay the eggs, and the kid's got to make it on its own
- But as human parents you know that to raise a child well you need to be devoted to the good times and the bad in the child's life
  - When things aren't going well you can't just abdicate your responsibility as a parent — although I'm sure there are times when one would like to.
- And I'm sure that to raise a Godly child, parents desperately need to be Spirit led in every aspect of life
  - Once a mother has given birth, the story doesn't end!
- Mary walked the path with Jesus, with an air of anticipation, a devotion to duty and a sense of the Spirit
  - Right up to the end; right up to the cross.
- If we want to see the presence of Jesus and the sense of the Christmas Spirit beyond new year, then this is the route we have to follow
  - To know that we have a child to raise, to bring into the world
    - \* To excitedly anticipate what Jesus is going to do today, this week in your life and mine
    - \* To be devoted to our duties as a Christi followers even when they're unpleasant and seemingly go against our natural inclinations and talents

\* And in that to allow the Spirit to guide us and teach us in the way that we reveal this child to the world.

- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

### **Prayer of Response and Intercession**

- Hymn 465 — We have a gospel to proclaim

### **Benediction**

### **Doxology**