

At the name of Jesus

As February begins, the season of Epiphany draws to a close. It's an odd sort of a time in the church's calendar, Epiphany. I suspect that most people are more familiar with the Bible stories that we tell within it than we are with the season itself. Most will know the story of the Magi, whose foolishness is demonstrated when they expect to find the newborn king in Herod's palace, but whose wisdom is revealed when they do not return there for a second time. Many will be familiar with the story of Jesus's baptism where, as Jesus experiences the cleansing power of the river Jordan, a heavenly voice declares, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." And surely the most memorable of Jesus's public miracles is the first, where at a wedding banquet water is transformed into wine, and we are reminded that with God the best is always still to come.

The event that marks the end of Epiphany is, I suspect, the one that we are least familiar with. It goes by the name of Candlemas, and it is the moment when we remember Jesus being brought to the temple as a child to be named. As Jesus enters the Jerusalem temple with his parents, he is met by two characters: Simeon, to whom it had been revealed that he would not die before laying his eyes on Israel's Messiah, and Anna, an elderly widow who had faithfully watched, waited, and worshipped in the Temple.

This episode is striking for a number of reasons. One is the mixture of generations that we see altogether—Jesus as the child, Mary and Joseph the new parents, and Anna and Simeon the wise older heads. It's a good reminder that one of the remaining powers a church has is that it is often one of only a few places in society where generations not only mix, but take encouragement, support, and insight from each other. And it's a reminder too that God has a call on the life of all people, regardless of the number of years they have walked the earth. At no point are we too young to show the face of Jesus, or too old to be patronised and ignored.

What is also striking is that Anna and Simeon make such a sharp contrast to those who will later enter Jerusalem with Jesus. They are faithful watchers, when the disciples fall asleep in the garden and scatter at the cross. In Luke's Gospel, where we find this account, their witness is mirrored again by the return of the disciples whom Jesus meets on the road to Emmaus. Having discovered that the crucified Jesus is now the risen Jesus, they return with hearts set aflame to tell others the good news. I wonder how often we have walked a familiar route, but according to the season, our 3 lives have been in different spiritual places? God in Jesus has a knack of meeting us in different ways at these different times.

Candlemas may have been and gone by the time you read this, but it might be time to discover this story afresh. Perhaps, as new or older parents, you might be wondering what you'd find if you stepped through the doors of a church in the next few weeks? I'd like to think that it would be a genuinely intergenerational welcome. Perhaps you're wondering if God still has a plan for you even when you're not able to do as much as you could? Then maybe Anna's story will inspire you to realise that a vocation with God is for the whole of life. Perhaps your story is in here too, and God is waiting to call you by name.

— Rev Rob Glenny