**28th January 2018 The Presentation of Christ in the Temple:**

**Malachi 3: 1-5; Hebrews 2: 14-end; Luke 2: 22-40**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Seeing is believing. Isn’t it. There’s a section in a magazine I read occasionally called – It must be true; I read it in the tabloids…. If I saw it in the newspaper, it must be true; if I saw it on the side of a bus or a taxi, it must be true; if all the pictures I see in magazines show perfect people, then that is how everyone else is, so I must aspire to it as well. People, do we really want that for our sons and daughters and grandchildren?

The truth is, the spaces on buses and taxis say what someone is paying for; newspapers are all under the influence of owners and editors and have an agenda, and photographs are only perfect with the aid of a computer.

Yet we remain shackled to what is visible. If we can see it, it's true, if we can't then it isn't. I have been in school a couple of times this past week and the theme of worship has been spirituality – a word even we adults find hard to define. And in the context of that and of the RE curriculum, I had a conversation with a member of staff about how the children easily grasp the idea of God creating the world – they see it as a fact like many others they learn – but the idea of being in relationship with that God is hard. You have relationships with people you know and can see, and whose voice you can physically hear.

As adults, we can begin to understand that God speaks to us, and we to God, by other means, but children are more literal than that.

The gospel reading today is about two people who grasped a reality that others seemed unable to, and moreover managed to hold onto that reality for a long time before it actually came about.

Simeon had been waiting for something promised to him – the promise was the salvation of Israel. We don't know how long he'd been waiting, but we get the impression it was a good while. ‘This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.’ In other words, before he died, he would see the Messiah. Bear in mind that the people of Israel had been promised a Messiah for a very very very long time. And when we have to wait a very very very long time for something, sometimes we stop believing it is actually ever going to happen. But Simeon had never lost that hope and belief.

Anna had also been waiting a long time. She was widowed after only a few years of marriage, and had since then devoted her entire life and all her time to God and to being in the Temple. Over the years her faith that God would act never faltered. ‘She was of a great age. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’ There were others looking, but only she saw.

Early on in that passage, when Luke says: When the time came, and, There was a man in Jerusalem, who was looking forward…., there’s a sense of something outside our control, outside human control – a confidence that events will happen, but you have doubtless heard me say before that God’s time and ours are two totally different things. These events were set to happen, but only in God's good time. Simeon and Anna, rather than being frustrated by the waiting and the not being able to see had remained alive to the possibility that anything could happen at any moment - the future which God had long promised might burst into view anytime.

We only have to look back at the Christmas story to know that: one minute, a young girl called Mary was going about her ordinary everyday life, and the next an angel was telling her she was pregnant. One minute, Paul was riding along the Damascus road, the next he was flat on his back blinded by the glory of God and likely to remain that way for some time. And not just in the New Testament either: one minute, David was a shepherd boy, the next he was being dragged in from the fields to be anointed king of Israel. Things can happen in a flash; God's plan can be revealed quite dramatically - but we have to open our eyes, our lives and above all our minds to be ready. Just because we can't see the future doesn't mean that it's not coming.

Just looking around this past couple of weeks, there has been a sense of something happening. Rain and high winds notwithstanding. There are snowdrops in the churchyard; green spears of daffodils are poking up through the grass in the garden. New shoots are signs of Spring, certainly, but also in a way of hope and faith – of new life and the world moving forwards. We get to this stage of the winter and we start to get fed up with everything looking dead and bare and empty, but quite suddenly, something is there. And by the same token, we should all be able – and most of all willing - to wait and prepare for the day when what God has promised will suddenly appear, when that one small shoot pops through the soil as a foretaste of the Spring, and eventually the harvest, that will follow.

Simeon knew that God is God (and God is good and faithful) even though he had to wait and wait and wait. Anna never left the temple but at that moment she came, and, we are told, began to praise God and to speak about the child. Here was someone else was had been waiting and watching - and we only watch for something that we truly believe is coming pretty soon – so she was able to spot the precise moment when it happened, when the Messiah made his unlikely appearance as a human baby in the Temple.

Anna could now rejoice in the salvation of God's people because she was finally seeing the one who would bring it. Her waiting had not been in vain. Even though there were countless others who thought it was.

As mature adults and followers of Christ, we can do what the young people in our school are learning to do – namely be in relationship with One we can’t – yet – see: by prayer and Bible reading, by faithfulness and being together as part of this community of faith. If we learn from the examples of Simeon and Anna, we can begin to view the act of waiting in the context of God’s constant - though often invisible - presence among us.

And remember it wasn’t just Simeon and Anna in the story: Mary and Joseph too were maybe in a state of shock at the reactions the child was causing. They could only wonder at what was said about him. Wouldn’t you? It was going to be a long time – 30 years - before the start of Jesus’ public ministry - which meant a long period of pondering and waiting for them too. Watching for signs of the fulfilment of what the angels had told them so long ago. Wondering maybe whether they would ever see that come to fruition. And doubtless Mary’s worry about that last prophecy too…….

 All of us, in one way or another, are waiting for something from God - an answer to some burning question, a response to a prayer, guidance on the direction our life might be about to take. And while the answer is not always what we think we want or what we expect, it comes. In God’s good time. But that good time might just be today.

Maybe we can all resolve to open our eyes, hearts, minds to be ready to catch and recognise that moment when it comes. To recognise the presence of Jesus – whether visible or not. To experience the wonder of Simeon and Anna at an encounter with our God.

Of course, it might not be today, or tomorrow either. But it will come. With the fulfilment of God’s kingdom if not before. And so we continue to pray: Thy kingdom come.

**Amen**