

Four Inspiring People

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Galations 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Introduction (reflecting on Luke 2 verses 22-24)

Today we are going to wander slowly through the Gospel reading from Luke - we are going to walk slowly knowing that you can never walk too slowly through the Scriptures - stopping every now and then to ponder a word, phrase or image a little more fully. As we walk we will feel the undulating contours of the word - sometimes it will be easy walking - on a flat stretch or even downhill while at other times it will feel like we are walking uphill and we will have to lean into the word with our full weight to get through it - painfully rejoicing that this was the word meant for us.

Luke is writing to a unique community - a community where Jew and Gentile sat side by side in the pew. And we in South Africa could learn a lot from this mixed and diverse community and Luke's approach. We will notice repeatedly throughout Luke's Gospel that he takes the time to specifically mention and explain the Jewish traditions and rituals. In doing so he reassures his Jewish members that this community though inclusive of gentiles is still authentically and fully Jewish while at the same time educating the Gentiles of their adopted Jewish origins and invitation to appreciate and respect their Jewish heritage.

I remember preaching in a similar community in New York where the Methodist Sanctuary shares its premises with a Jewish Synagogue - it was meant to be a temporary arrangement that became permanent when they learnt that they could actually live happily side by side.

But lets be honest it is no small task to manage the flourishing of a community that is made up of a rich diversity of people - from different languages, cultures, classes, sexual orientations as well as the differences that exist between the people who are new and the people who have been in the community for years.

There is often a tension between the old and the new when they get to sit next to each other in the same pew. Some of you at CMM have been here for years and some of you (like me) are new. How are we going to sit with each other? I propose that both the old and the new are potentially both a gift and a threat. You see, the potential threat from the old is that the community gets stuck, while the potential threat from the new is that the community gets up-rooted.

The truth is if we are going to be faithful we need each other - may we be given eyes to see each other as gift.

This Scripture also invites us at CMM to reflect on how we can give deeper expression to our diversity especially in the languages and form of our worship. Can the way we worship become a creative blend that faithfully includes everyone, rejoicing even when we may not understand the language because we know that at that moment others are praising God in their mother tongue.

Mary and Joseph (reflecting on verses 22-24 and 33-35)

The first two inspiring people Luke introduces us to are Mary and Joseph. We read that "according to the law of Moses" they took Jesus to the temple on the 8th day. In this they were fulfilling the requirements of Leviticus 12:6-8 and Exodus 13:2-12. It was through circumcision that each child was "consecrated" to the Lord. This was not merely a religious ritual - it was at one and the same time a political protest against Egyptian slavery. You see children born into slavery belonged to the slave master but through circumcision they consecrated the children to God affirming the real truth that they are God's children and not Pharaoh's slaves.

This teaches us something very important about Mary and Joseph. They were people of the word. And they were people of the word for a reason - to remember and reclaim their true identity as God's children and not slaves to the Roman Empire under which they lived.

This reminds us of the reason we are also called to be a people of the word - so that we remember and reclaim our true identity as God's children who have been called out of the slavery to the dominant culture. Only when we know who we belong to will we be free and empowered to be who we truly are. And only when we live into our true identity will the dominant culture be meaningfully challenged and changed.

How can we be a "people of the word" at CMM?

Further we are reminded of the obvious - that Jesus was Jewish. Sadly Christians have a tendency to forget this fact. In truth we will not fully understand Jesus unless we understand him as a Jew whose life was soaked in Judaism. We would do well to invite the local Rabbi's of this city to come and teach us about Judaism so that we can have a better grasp of Jesus.

We learn too from Luke's brief introduction that Joseph and Mary were poor. We see this from the fact that they only brought a "pair of turtle doves or young pigeons" as a sacrifice which the law allowed if the parents were unable to afford a lamb as stated in Leviticus 12. They were poor yet they were still

faithful. We sometimes have a tendency to expect less from the poor because they are poor. The poor like anyone are in as much need of the challenge of the Gospel as they are in need of its comfort.

We note that the public recognition of Jesus was in the stable. This then is the second public recognition of Jesus and it takes place in the temple. This should serve to humble us as temple/church goers because it reminds us that Jesus is often recognised in the world and by the "non-religious" first before he is even recognised in the church/temple by so called religious people. As Church we must acknowledge that we are often playing catch up to the world when it comes to recognising Jesus in our midst.

Further we learn that faithful people often fail to see themselves as special or faithful in any way. We read in verse 33 that Joseph and Mary were "amazed" at what Simeon sang about their child Jesus. I find this encouraging that even though they were part of the Divine plan, purpose and presence they were unaware of it. They were amazed! It was obvious to others but not to them. Let us remember this when as individuals and as Church we do not feel part of the Divine story. When everything we do around here feels so ordinary that we wonder how it could possibly have anything to do with God's divine workings in the world - be assured that this was also true for Mary and Joseph.

Simeon (reflecting on verse 25-35)

The third inspiring person Luke introduces us to is Simeon who we read was "righteous, devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, the Holy Spirit rested on him and that he was guided by the Holy Spirit". That is quite a testimonial that Luke has written! It would be wonderful to have someone write such words for our CV, don't you think?

So let me then ask how our lives would have to change for such a testimonial to be written about us? If New Year Resolutions are your thing - I think this question could helpfully guide our thoughts at this time.

There is one line in Luke's testimonial of Simeon that really struck me. That Simeon was someone "looking forward to consolation of Israel". It raises two questions for me that again we may want to reflect on. The first is: "What direction do I - do we - spend our time looking in?" Are we a people who look forwards or backwards? Simeon looked forward! And as such I sense he was a person who was open to being surprised. Backward looking people (people focused only on the "good old days" or the hurt and pain and failure of the past) close themselves off to surprises. Simeon looked forward! And as such I sense he was a forgiving person choosing rather to allow what is new to determine his relationships, than what is old. Will we at CMM be a forward looking people?

The second question it raises for me is: "What do I - do we - really long for?" We read that Simeon longed for the consolation - the end of suffering - for his nation (which in these very violent days is so needed). Are we a people who long for the end of suffering - in our land and world? "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice for they will be filled" - said Jesus. [Matthew 5:6]. Simeon was now filled!

Now someone once said: "We will work in the same direction as we hope", [Cornelius Plantinga]. In other words if we want to figure out what someone is hoping for or longing for we need simply look at the direction or focus of their work. What we spend our time, energy and resources on should alert us to our true longings. Is the City aware of our longings because of the direction of our work?

Simeon is an honest person - he refuses to leave out the hard news that comes with the birth of this baby. He is not like some TV evangelists who speak of Jesus as the one who will simply increase our profits and make our lives a breeze. Instead he speaks the disturbing truth of how Jesus' life will convict the world to make a choice of how to live life. I hope that at CMM we will always have the courage to present the hard news about Jesus.

What is encouraging about Simeon's Spirit filled life is that he had to wait just about his entire life for this Messiah-meeting moment. So often when we hear of people who are "Spirit-filled" we hear testimonies of everything just fitting into place neatly, quickly and smoothly, but here we have Simeon who waited and waited even though we read that the Holy Spirit rested on him. Perhaps this teaches us that Spirit-filled people are not so much people who are always feeling God's presence in their lives, but people who remain faithful even when they can only feel God's absence. This is the powerful testimony of Mother Teresa who kept faithful despite the fact that for over half her life she experienced God as more absent than present.

Anna (reflecting on verses 36-38)

The forth inspiring person that Luke introduces us to is the prophet Anna. Straight off we can see what Luke is doing. Not only is he concerned about the relationships between Jew and Gentile in his community but he is concerned about the relationships between men and women in his patriarchal-defined community. Simeon was a male (carrying all the power that that involved) from a known tribe of Southern Judah and now Anna was a woman - and not only a woman but a widow from one of the most insignificant Jewish tribes tucked away in the Galilean highlands of North Palestine. Luke's message is clear. This child Jesus is not only for all but is accessible and recognisable by all. Jesus is within reach of everyone!

We read that she was the daughter of Phanuel (meaning "face of God") and it is as if she carried a longing within her to see the face of God and that she would shape her living around that longing. Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God - says Jesus [Matthew 5:8]. Anna was devout says Luke, and now she sees the face of God in this Child Jesus.

It is useful to ask what the difference is between being a devout person or someone who merely follows empty rituals. I suggest that the difference is the level of expectation between the two. The truly devout person walks on tip-toe - ever open to being surprised by God and ever awake to God's presence in the world.

Why don't you stand up - go on - stand up and stand on your tip-toes. Not so easy is it? So it begs the question: How did Anna manage to remain a tip-toe-expectation-kind-of-a-person? Luke gives us the answer: Anna "worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day". Anna could remain on her tip-toes because she spent a great deal of her time on her knees! Prayer is what will keep us on our toes. Prayer will keep our souls free of the ever threatening cynicism of the world that tells us over and over again that the way the world is will be the way the world will remain. Prayer is what gives our hope the ability to take another breath.

The most beautiful and important gift you can give me as your new pastor is to pray for me and to pray that I will pray. And I truly believe that the most beautiful and important gift I can give all of you is to pray for you and to pray that you will pray.

Let us at CMM be a people who spend time on our knees so that we can walk on our tip-toes ever ready to see the face of Jesus in our midst.

May that which is of God from these words settle in our hearts.
Amen.

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