

Christmas Worship

Every year as it draws near to Christmas time, churches are looking to find a fresh angle on an old and very familiar story. Isn't it amazing how you can keep on meditating on the incarnation and still find new revelation in Jesus that will cause you to worship Him? This season, Christmas carols are sung many times over, the words rolling easily off the tongue, and yet they contain timeless truths that can suddenly break out of our spirit like they are being sung for the first time.

When we think back to that first Christmas revelation of the Christ child, in many ways those events were also not unfamiliar. A baby was born to a poor Jewish couple and was circumcised and brought to the temple. It happened every day. Many must have seen Mary and Joseph with the new baby Jesus and thought nothing of it. People did not always fall to their knees and worship Him whenever He passed by. Likewise, over the years, Simeon and Anna must have seen a hundred babies, much like this one, brought into the Temple to be presented to the Lord - and yet something about this day, about this baby, struck them as extraordinary and caused them to worship and prophesy. Simeon cried out "My eyes have seen Your salvation...!" (Luke 2:30) and Anna gave thanks to God and told others that Jesus would redeem Jerusalem (Luke 2:38)

What is it that causes something so ordinary, so every-day, so well-known to suddenly bring us to our knees? As we search to put across the Christmas message in our churches again this year, how can we inspire true worship, from the heart, instead of meaningless repetitions of familiar carols and readings? Perhaps we can learn something from Simeon and Anna who were able to see beyond the swaddling cloth wrappings of Christmas and look into the very face of God.

First we learn from Simeon to come to worship with our hearts **prepared**. Luke 2:25 tells us that he was a "righteous and devout man who was looking for the consolation of Israel", and that "the Holy Spirit was upon Him". This is a description of Simeon's general character. He was always alert in the Spirit, always looking out for where God was going to act and move next, always keeping his own heart right before God. It is no wonder, then, that when God decided to turn up on the scene, Simeon was among the first to spot it.

So often we are simply not prepared in our hearts to encounter God when we come to worship. We have all kinds of junk in there that we have collected from the week: wrong we have done to others, wrongs done to us that we have collected and stored up. Jesus said that if we try and come to worship carrying this sort of stuff, we won't get very far. We should just leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled first (Matt 5:23-24). If we are not righteous and devout, if we are not keeping our hearts clear before God and others, we will find it hard to meet with Him when we come to worship.

Christmas can be a time fraught with relational difficulties. We are often busy trying to serve the Lord and bless our friends and family, and it is easy for the stress and pressure to build up. It can also be a time where we indulge our flesh more than usual, eating, drinking, parties and late nights, and that can give rise to 'fleshy' behaviour. We need to be diligent that we are keeping in step with the Spirit and not just living according to the flesh over Christmas (Gal 5:16-18).

Simeon was constantly listening to the Lord and so He heard the prompting of the Spirit to go to the Temple at the time when Jesus would be there (Luke 2:27). As we keep listening to the Lord, as we keep asking Him to fill us with His Spirit, as we keep allowing Him to check our hearts, we too will find we are prepared to meet Him in worship - and, along with the people we seek to lead into His presence, we will find we can suddenly fix our eyes upon the face of Jesus.

From Anna we can learn to **persevere** in our worship. Luke tells us that from her youth to her old age she "never left the temple" but would "serve day and night with fastings and prayers" (Luke 2:36-37). Not many of us these days can claim to take our worship so seriously. We set aside an hour or so for a meeting before we rush off to take care of the rest of our lives. It is no wonder that we sometimes leave feeling doubtful as to whether we have really met with the Lord or not. Do you ever find yourself asking "Lord, I know I've sung some songs and prayed some prayers to You today, but were You actually there and listening...?!" Of course in one sense the Lord is always there and listening. But like in any good relationship we need to set aside time and space to spend with the other person for a flow of love to really be offered and received. When we rush in and out of worship all the time, we don't give the Lord time to share His secrets with us. Anna's constant perseverance to be in the presence of the Lord meant that she was available for God to tell her his fantastic news: "This ordinary-looking baby is going to redeem Jerusalem!" Anna was less concerned about building a life for herself than she was about pursuing intimacy with her God. The reasons we have for not spending more time with Him always come down to our desire to invest in our earthly lives. Anna had discovered early on that her spiritual life was the only one worth investing in. Widowed after seven years of marriage, left childless, we presume, and for whatever reason unable to marry again, she must have found that most of her earthly dreams and ambitions were shattered. But instead of sinking in the disappointment, she handed her life over into the service of the Lord and found fulfilment for eighty four years in working for Him. If we spent less time chasing earthly dreams, or mourning the loss of them, and gave ourselves to pursuing the Lord, we would find that what He has to give back to us, in this life and the next, is infinitely more precious than anything we could have built for ourselves. Jesus promises to take care of us if we commit to that (Matt 6:31-33). It takes perseverance, prayers and fasting to die to ourselves and live for Christ, but once we are in that place we will find that we encounter Jesus, even at the most mundane of moments, and true worship and thanks spill forth from our otherwise uninspired hearts.

As we seek for inspiration to bring that 'extra-special, something-to-remember' to our Christmas worship services this year, let us learn from Simeon and Anna to prepare ourselves and persevere until we receive the beautiful revelation of Jesus that God is just bursting to give us. The readings and carols may remain familiar, but all of a sudden we'll find a fresh encounter with the virgin born God as He bursts in to do something unexpected and wonderful in our lives!