

26th January 2025

Benefice Service of Light

Peter Durman

*Luke 2:22-38*

Well, thank you everyone, and look, it's a real honour to come here and preach in this amazing place. It's a bit fancier than North Stoke, I'd say. You've got heating, for a starter. And it's also lovely to be here with all three churches and on this special Service of Light as well. It's a real pleasure to see us all together, and it's a theme of these three churches being together, but I'll come back to it at the end.

And of course, this Service of Light falls at an interesting time of year in the church calendar. As Tom mentioned earlier, we're kind of coming to the end of the Christmas period, that started at the beginning of Advent, and we're now starting to turn towards looking towards Easter and the start of Lent in a couple of weeks' time.

And it's this turning point when the nights are still quite long and dark, and this Service of Light is a little bit of a glimmer of hope in these dark days. And it's quite interesting as well, particularly now that all the Christmas lights have gone, it does feel a bit gloomy. I think in medieval times they used to keep all the Christmas decorations up, all the greenery up, right until Candlemas Day. It was only relatively recently that we started this thing of taking Christmas decorations down on Twelfth Night, so we've sort of flipped it around the other way.

And the timing of this Service of Light is also governed by the passage we heard this evening, this story from Luke, this thing about the 40 days after Christmas. And of course, as you all know, this is really because Mary, once she'd given birth under Jewish law, she had to wait 40 days until she could go back to the temple. She had to wait to be purified, and then she could go back to the temple.

And this was then the first time that meant that Jesus could be presented to the temple. And of course, it's quite significant because he was the firstborn son as well. And you'll recall this ties back to, obviously, Exodus, the time of Moses, when the plagues came upon Egypt and the tenth and final plague was on the firstborn. And you'll recall the Jewish tradition was that the Jewish firstborn were all protected from the plague, and in recognition, the Jewish required that the firstborn sons be presented in the temple with a sacrifice, as you heard from the reading.

So that sort of sets the scene for what then happens, this amazing story of this account of these two elderly people, Simeon and Anna. They're both wise and faithful servants. They're not temple officials. They're just everyday people in the temple. And we hear of how the Holy Spirit was working through them both, and in the case of Simeon, repeatedly on this occasion.

And he was told that the Holy Spirit visited Simeon, and it revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, the Christ. Kind of imagine that. That's an incredible thing, isn't it? That you're not going to die until you meet the Christ, the Messiah. And we know that day that, obviously, the Spirit intervenes to tell Simeon to go to the temple.

We don't know how long Simeon had to wait between when he was told by the Holy Spirit and when he actually went to the temple, but something caused him to go to the temple that very day when Joseph and Mary were at the temple. And it's clear that, obviously, the Holy Spirit was working in again when he was in the temple, and he could recognize Jesus. Even though he was a tiny baby, he recognised him as the Messiah.

And then we have this amazing encounter when he took Jesus into his arms, and he said this amazing prayer. Above [slide displayed] is this encounter of them in the temple with the two older people there. That's Simeon and Anna, and you can see here Simeon holding the baby Jesus in here. And he says this amazing prayer: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." And you can really sense the joy and the release for Simeon. You can see back in this picture in his face, "You may now dismiss your servant in peace and in the knowledge of Christ's salvation."

And it's also interesting that he describes Jesus as a light for revelation to Gentiles. And I'm sure Luke, as a Gentile, was very keen to emphasize this point. This was for all, not just for the Jews. And think as well, this was in a Jewish temple with lots of Jewish sort of ceremonies going on at the time. So, it's quite an amazing thing to be said at that time.

And then Simeon then goes on to bless Mary and Joseph. And he also gives this message to Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too." So again, the Holy Spirit here is working through Simeon to predict these challenging times ahead for both Jesus and for Mary. It's a sign of things to come, even for this small child at this early tender age.

And then we have Anna, who's described as an old woman and a prophet who effectively lived in the temple. She said that she'd never left the temple. She worshipped night and day, day and night, fasting and praying. And she'd been there for some years. And then Anna came up to Mary and Joseph, and at that very moment she gave thanks to God and she also recognised Jesus as the Messiah. So, these two people coming together to recognize Jesus as the Messiah at that time. And the passage says, "She then would share this news to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel."

It's interesting that Jesus is revealed to these two elderly people. They're just an ordinary man, an ordinary woman, who'd been waiting with sort of faithful patience for this very moment. Personally, I've always found these sort of accounts of fulfilled prophecies in the Bible and these answers to prayer as being very sort of faith affirming for me. I always find it incredible, these accounts of people receiving a word and then it playing out right from over thousands of years, from the Old Testament through into the New Testament.

But I'd like to come back to this theme from Simeon's prayer where Jesus is declared a light for everyone. And it ties in with our theme, this theme of our Service of Light. And of course, as we read through the Gospels, this light that Jesus brings is described many times in one way or another. It's almost like the Gospels are urging us to know today that Jesus is the light and life, and he wants all of us to welcome it, all of us to encounter this light. And it's a light that we kind of need to allow into our lives and it's a light that we shine out to others. That's kind of what it means. It's part of that thing about being a disciple.

A couple of weeks ago, Naomi Pendle spoke here on Ephesians 1. She talked about allowing the light to flood into our lives. And it's an amazing, powerful light. It's sort of more powerful than we can imagine. Obviously, in Acts, we hear Paul describes this sort of vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. It's brighter than the sun. And in Revelation, John, when he sees the sort of glory of Christ there, he describes it as the sun shining in full strength.

And I sometimes think when we look at our own ways that we represent this through candles and things, it doesn't kind of get there, but we can kind of do our best. And when we become Christians, it's because this light has shone into our hearts. It's a truly intense light that uncovers our sinfulness by its blazing holiness and it shines a purifying and life-giving power to all of us, even into the deepest recesses of our hearts.

And sometimes, I don't know about you, but sometimes letting that light in can be a little uncomfortable. Sometimes, the light can be quite painful. It exposes things that perhaps we don't always want to be exposed (myself included). Maybe things I've spent a lifetime making sure I'll never see the light of day. I know it's a tough time. But I don't know if this resonates with you, but sometimes it's hard to let go and allow that light fully into our lives. But we have to remember this light is really about love. It's from a loving God, a loving God who has us in his best interest, who wants to take control of our lives in a loving way and to support us and help us.

But as I said, it's not just about letting the light into our lives. It's also about something else. And Jesus said something so really incredible. He said that to all those that follow him, we are the light. We are the light of the world. And in this chapter here, Matthew 5:14-15, Jesus says to his followers, "you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand. And it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Now it might sound rather silly, but ever since I've lived in North Stoke, I've had this picture of North Stoke being this light on the hill shining out. And our church is open, as we touched on it earlier. And we have these countless visitors you heard about. We have all these visitors come through the door. And you only have to read the visitors' book to get a sense of their encounter. Some of them do encounter God there, and they talk about it in the visitor book.

And we see people come there at times of need as well, and they write prayer requests in there as well. And just like here, this building, it is a testament. It is a witness to the community we stand here. I always think of this church at the times of Christmas and Easter when you have your star and your cross shining out across Weston. I think that's a really lovely witness to the community.

But of course, these are just the buildings. And far more importantly are each of us, each of you. And as I was preparing what I'm going to say today, I had this picture of us all being almost like lights, individual lights moving around in our communities, touching people, interfacing with everybody that we come in touch with. And that's kind of what it's about, the Holy Spirit working through us. And I wonder if you could picture this now as we sit here. If we sort of close our eyes slightly, imagine us all being like lights here, sitting here and ready to go out and share that with the people around us.

One of the joys about living in a small village like North Stoke is that it is a tight-knit community somewhere where it is possible to know all of your neighbours by name. And for me that means on a personal level that I can pray for all of them by name. It's a real privilege to be part of a community like that and where people are looking out for each other and where you can really take a prayerful interest in people's lives. And I have lived in big cities too, and I do know it's harder in a big city. It just takes longer and so on. But it is still possible. For me, it was about breaking it down into a smaller task.

Before I lived in North Stoke, I lived in Bristol, and there I lived in a street in Bristol and for me it was about getting to know my neighbours. And then eventually I got to know the whole street and then we got together in community events and it was a really encouraging time.

And I think it can be a bit overwhelming, but I think we always just have to break it down and trust the Lord. I think it also requires patience, that sort of same prayerful patience that we heard about from Simeon and Anna today. It's all too easy to try to force the pace a little bit, to want results, to want to see action happening. And I've learned that a little bit of gentle patience can go a long way. It's about holding on to the fact that we are that light of the world. You know, if people walk in the darkness around us, if they're going to sort of see this great light, it is going to be through us. It is going to be through us working in our communities and as followers of Jesus, as bearers of the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus is asking us to let this light shine. "Let our light shine before others so that they can see our good works, but also give glory to our Father in heaven." And there's still, let's be honest, there are still too many people in our world dwelling in darkness. And it's up to us to show them the light, to be this light of the world, to let our good works and the works that we do on behalf of Jesus, let our lives and our love for Jesus, let that shine with as much intensity as we can so that they may also see this light that came into the world.

So to conclude, we've heard this amazing account of the Holy Spirit working through Simeon and Anna, just ordinary faithful servants like us, basically just like us, ordinary people going to church. And Simeon gives this amazing prophecy that Jesus declared, was declared a light for all, a light that we all need to welcome into our lives and that we can share with others.

And finally, just to finish, I think on a personal level, this sort of service also caused me to reflect back a little bit to three years ago. As I look out among you, I can see a number of you who are involved in this. All three churches came together and began preparing the parish profile. And one of the threads that ran through our meeting and our thinking and our discussions and ultimately into that parish profile was the desire to see how these three rather different churches could work together, more closely together. And it's certainly something we prayed about.

And so this service really gladdens my heart as an example of all this happening. And I'd like to thank Tom and Emma and all the other, the lay readers and all the people in, all the people who volunteer in all of our churches, that you all do such an amazing job in helping us. And I think as well of the choir that comes up, braves the weather and the cold to come up and sing at our carol service. I think the same at Langridge.

And these things are so important for our communities. They are times, those special services when our communities come out and can experience God. And we also, there's so many other ways that you support us through the church office, through the safeguarding team, and we really, really appreciate that support. So I just wanted to thank you for that. And also, we should just carry on encouraging each other as one church in Christ. I think that's so important that we are together as one church in Christ.

So I just pray that all our lives will be filled with his light and that we'll all be transformed by this amazing light, this amazing powerful light. I pray that we all become witnesses of this hope and love in this world and that these churches can work together for your glory.

Amen.