

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Candlemas

Sunday 29 January 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

What are we looking forward to? I'm thinking of a horizon a bit further out than Sunday lunch. What are we really looking forward to, yearning for, longing for? What is our hope for ourselves, for all of us, our hope for our society, our hope for our world? What are we looking forward to?

Today, a few days prematurely, we are celebrating the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which we know as Candlemas, and this Feast, 40 days after Jesus' birth, is a hinge point for us spiritually and emotionally, turning us from just looking back to Jesus' birth and the beginning of our story of salvation, now to looking forward to its culmination, to the denouement, for which Jesus was born – we look towards Lent and to Holy Week and Easter, we look to the cross and resurrection.

So that surely is the answer to what are we looking forward to, but what does it mean for us? And what does it mean today, when we seem to find ourselves focussing on just one day at a time, constrained in our imagination by the grey damp cold.

Many of us are caught up one way or another helping those for whom the grey damp cold is far more than an inconvenience, but a state in which they and their families can barely survive. So what are any of us looking forward to, when each day seems to have troubles enough of its own?

How can we look forward when the constraint on our imagination feels so powerful. Whether that is in the grey cold damp, struggling with the cost of living, or a different existential constraint, a fear of what is happening in our world, which holds us in apprehension, limiting our imagination. Looking forward can seem harder than it used to be, or at least as we remember it to be.

It is at this moment that we find ourselves arriving at the Temple in Jerusalem, and we walk into the vast precincts just in time to see new parents with their nearly six week old son being greeted by wise old Simeon. We know Simeon of course. We may be sitting near him right now.

Yes, he is getting well on in years, but there is a sort of unhurried calm about him, with just a twinge of anticipation. He is often here, and we know he says his prayers, we can feel God's closeness, the sense of God's Holy Spirit in him – the Holy Spirit that has led him, and, well, us, to come here today. He has wise and gentle words for each of us, but we also sense a question in him not yet answered, a quest in him not yet realised.

What is Simeon looking forward to? Can he help us as we try to think about what we are really looking forward to? Well, we know this about him. He is looking forward to the consolation of Israel. But what does that mean?

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“Consolation” is translated from the same word in the Greek version of the OT as we hear in Isaiah 60:1 – “Comfort, comfort, my people”. Consolation, comfort. And it is the same word as John’s Gospel uses for the Holy Spirit – paraklesis, paraclete, comforter. Simeon is waiting for the consolation, the comfort of Israel, the fullness of the Spirit of God, and somehow by that same Spirit that leads him, he knows he is going to see that comfort, that consolation today, now.

He has longed for the rescue, the redemption, the healing, the freedom, the safety for his people where everything about their lives is filled with and sustained by God, a world therefore, Simeon would understand, of justice and peace.

I suspect we are looking forward to a similar sort of comfort and consolation for our world, our age. What might that look like for us, for our time, for our world? What sort of comfort and consolation might we be looking forward to? What would a world filled and sustained by God look like?

For many, the comfort of warmth, of food, of a roof over their heads, of companionship, of care, of safety – that is what so many long for, yearn for, right now. It is the comfort, the consolation and comfort of justice. We too look forward to, long for, a just world.

And right now, comfort and consolation for us would also be the comfort of peace – peace in our homes when the strain of family conflict draws us down and down, peace in our world where we are not on edge about what next may happen in the Ukraine, or in the Middle East, or in the Horn of Africa. Comfort and consolation means peace.

And as we wonder how that can happen, we see Simeon take the young baby in his arms, and astonish his parents, and astonish us as he declares this child, this tiny infant, is all he has been longing for, the comfort, the salvation, the rescue, the hope of his people Israel. And that for that comfort, is not just for Israel but for everyone, a light to lighten the Gentiles.

In this moment of taking the baby in his arms, we can see Simeon letting go. We see the relief; the peace is palpable. His question is answered, his quest is fulfilled, and so now Lord let your servant depart in peace. He is holding the consolation, the comfort of justice and peace. And that is our moment of realisation too.

For many of us here, whether young or old, we have had some share in Simeon’s experience – we can look back and see that moment when somehow the infant Christ, the source of all consolation and comfort, the source of all justice and peace, the infant Christ has been placed in our arms, the precious gift of recognition and realisation and trust and hope and faith, placed in our arms, and as we too take hold of the child, so we can let go.

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And that letting go is not a letting go to death, not yet, but a letting go of the anxiety of being overwhelmed, of the constraint of our imagination and our hope, the letting go of it being all up to us or up to humans on their own, of knowing that by this infant, and all he is and will do and will become, justice and peace become real.

And we have a part in that, a part to play in making it real in our world, a world to be filled and sustained by God, a world, step by step, piece by piece, is a world which can find justice and peace.

And when we feel overwhelmed, and our imagination and hope feel constrained, how do we reconnect with the hope that is in us? It is no accident that this scene we are witnessing happens in the Temple. It begins in the Temple.

The Temple is the place of prayer for people of prayer. And prayer is the place, where we take hold and let go, where we see salvation, where the infant, the hope and consolation of all, is placed once again in our arms and we see the world's salvation. And it is from the place of prayer the Spirit leads us out to engage again with renewed clarity and energy in the food bank, and challenging the reasons for the food bank; in reaching out to refugees, and challenging the treatment so many suffer; supporting the people of Ukraine, and challenging the thinking and actions that promote war.

So this is what we look forward to: the reality of the comfort and consolation of God's tangible, graspable justice and peace that leads us to action. And those candles we have just blessed will be a light for us as we walk towards the light of the resurrection that overcomes all the darkness of our world.