

Let's Start At The Very Beginning

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Luke 2:21-40



Child to parent: "Why is my name 'Glug-glug'?"

Parent to child: "The vicar fell into the font at your Christening." (*A joke to appeal to the lapsed Anglicans in our midst.*)

The joke above is one of the less serious reasons that I'm glad that I'm a Baptist Minister. Christenings used to scare me. One of the genuinely most frightening experiences of my life was when, as a teenager, I was tasked with carrying a baptismal bundle of babydom around the aisles of my dad's church to show this latest junior member of the community to the assembled congregation. Not blessed with young cousins who needed dandling on my knee (if only I knew what that meant), I was inexperienced in the ways of locking my arms around a wriggling infant that didn't result in a) inadvertently holding it by its bonneted head or b) dropping it onto the unsympathetic tiles at my feet. To have someone else's precious offspring thrust into my rubberised arms was not a joy-filled time for me. Shuffling among the congregation, aware of the joy mixed with genuine concern among the faces of those who knew that my cack-handedness would come to the surface in all its wailing glory, this was not a day that I am proud of. The relief felt by me was reflected back in the faces of the parents who received back their unscathed treasure at the end of my shame-filled marathon. At least it didn't cry or vomit all over me...

Funnily enough, it was only once I was able to hold my own child that I began to feel comfortable being presented with babies from other families to carry, dandle (I'm still not sure that I know what that entails) or even dangle (probably not recommended). We don't do Dedications as often as many Anglican churches do Christenings, so the opportunities for me to demonstrate my baby-wrangling talents are fewer, but at least I'm more confident than I once was.

None of which, I trust, happened to the infant Jesus as he was presented at the Temple after his name was confirmed as the one suggested by Mary's angelic visitor. The naming ceremony was just one of the acts of thanksgiving, sacrifice and commitment, as laid down by the Law of Moses (First Century Edition). A pair of birds was a low-cost option reflecting the low status of the family, offered to atone for Mary's sins (again, Luke is low on detail, but the simple maths of 1 pigeon/dove = any/all sin suffices, though Joseph gets off scot free).

And then we get to the fun stuff. Possibly just like me and my round of baby-juggling around the church, Mary and Joseph are showing off their newly-named son to the gathered hordes making their own sacrifices and oblations when they bump into Simeon, a wizened old man (at least that's how I imagine him). I get the feeling that neither Joseph nor Mary would relish the attention given by Simeon as his gnarled hands gently eased the infant Saviour from his parents' arms and declared the Nunc Dimittis (another nod to the Anglicans and ex-Anglicans amongst us) over his tiny form.

Just when they prise Jesus back off Simeon with much nodding and thanks (and probable bafflement, particularly as the bit about soul-piercing will not mean as much to Mary then as it will do when the Magi present them with the embalming spice myrrh some time later), they are then accosted by another aged temple-dweller in the shape of Anna, who declares that Jesus is precisely who quite a few others have been telling them he is, namely the long-awaited Messiah. Thanks; no pressure, then.

Finally, they can make their escape back to Nazareth, probably unsure if they dare risk their annual pilgrimage back to the big city come Passover time. Of course, if we read on, we find out that any misgivings they may have had then are probably amplified once they head back there some twelve years later (Luke 2:41-52).

But enough of Mary and Joseph and their continuing journey through parenthood, as problematic as that will have been not just to have a new-born under the cloud of uncertainty and tainted by accusations of unfaithfulness, but also with every second person (and angel) telling you how important he will be. We'll leave them on the road to Nazareth and concentrate instead on Simeon and Anna.

There is a round on the TV quiz show "A Question Of Sport" called "What happened next?" In one sense, this is a question that I would love to have answered about so much of the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. For example, what happened to the shepherds when they returned to their hillside, or the Magi at their homecoming, or to the many and myriad healed people Jesus encountered in his ministry, or to the boy who gave up his picnic so that more than 5,000 could be fed, or the Centurion who found faith at Calvary, or... the list seems endless.

But maybe for Simeon and Anna the answer is easier to speculate on with a degree of certainty and accuracy. For Simeon, he knew that the encounter with Mary, Joseph and Jesus was to be the penultimate page in his life story. He fully expected that shortly after their meeting he would breathe his last breath on earth and rise again in glory. And, I imagine, he welcomed this with open arms. What else was there for him? He had lived for so long under this Spirit promise (we don't know exactly how long for, but we can reasonably assume that it wasn't in his previous night's dream) that probably there would be little left for him to achieve.

For Anna, we can probably also guess that she won't have lived long after that joyous day in the Temple. Like Simeon, what would be left for her? If she had family around, they would either be long dead or,

having rejected her already by not providing for her in her dotage, there would be little left for her to give them, or receive from them. She had seen the Light, so why stick around any longer? Or, like Simeon, this might well have been her chance to exit stage left to join the choir immortal.

So here we have two people, equally aged, equally devoted, equally in tune with the Holy Spirit's prompting, equally waiting for the promised Messiah.

Taking them as examples for us (whether we are as aged as them or not), we might want to ask the question "what are we waiting for?" Simeon and Anna were both delighted to meet the baby Messiah; for them it was enough to know that there was an impending end to the wait for salvation. They didn't need to (or indeed have lived long enough to) see the fulfilment of Jesus' mission at the cross. For them, to know that Jesus had been born was sufficient, even if the only ability that was on display was an eight-day old cry of pain at the surgeon's knife.

Their wait was over, even though it was going to take another 30 or so years to reach its conclusion. In that way, their story is similar to the shepherds, who were also content to call the newly-born Jesus they encountered "Messiah".

So maybe the question we should be asking of ourselves is "do we wait too long?" There is a danger that we miss out on what God is doing because we're waiting for it to arrive fully packaged, fully formed and (to borrow a contentious phrase) "oven-ready". However, maybe what we should be learning from Anna and Simeon is that God is evident in the process of getting things together as much as in the finished article, even right at the very beginning.

God is keen on process and progress, as well as on results. Let's face it, Jesus encountered far more people pre-crucifixion than he did post-Easter Sunday. He also left a lot of people with their questions unanswered. That's probably why we are left asking "What happened next?" about so many people; if Jesus was happy to let them find out the rest of their stories without his direct involvement, it's unreasonable of us to expect the gospel writers to fill in the blanks for us.

There's an old saying that goes along the lines of "God loves me as I am, but loves me too much to leave me as I am." The transformation of the Holy Spirit is an ongoing process; we might want to also use the phrase "Have patience, God isn't finished with me yet."

God wasn't finished with saving the world when Jesus was born; that came much, much later. But for Simeon and Anna, it was sufficient to know that he was around and working, even though he was just a vulnerable, helpless Babe. Maybe we also need to start looking for signs of God at the beginning, as well as at the end...

Amen.

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