

January 1st 2012. 'Miss Thomson and her Kin.' First Sunday after Christmas. Vicar Joyce.

Numbers 6: 22 to 26, Galatians 4: 4-7, Luke 2: 22-40

Welcome to the New Year.

In our small village church in Foxhill out of Nelson Miss Thompson was always faithfully present. She always sat in the same pew and to my young eyes wore the same hat and coat every Sunday. Highly regarded because she was old and a relation of Lord Rutherford, I cannot remember ever talking to her apart from greetings. One Sunday she and I were the only people in church. The Lay Reader read the service and a chapter from Pilgrims' Progress. I remember being so pleased that I had gone to church. How dreadful if Miss Thompson had been the only one there, making the responses alone. She was so reliable and always present just as Simeon and Anna were always in the temple in Jerusalem. I imagine John's 98 year-old Dad has such a role at his church in Hamilton, a regular at worship. Eric Nancekevil and Barbara Grantham, who both died recently, were such people for us. Dependable, a statesman and a stateswoman highly regarded by the congregation; they left us a legacy of gracious faithful Christianity.

What a gift older people are to the rest of us! What a gift the baby Jesus was to Anna and Simeon. I enjoy the family stories of Jesus. I imagine you all enjoy hearing the stories of your early days before you could remember or telling your grandchildren, nieces and nephews about the early events of their lives. Mary, Joseph and Jesus observed the rites that custom and the law required and as Jesus grew Mary would have shared with him the amazing events around his birth and early childhood. Circumcision of males was widely practised. Originally it was practised at puberty or at the time of marriage. The Hebrew word for Father-in-law literally means 'the circumciser'. There were practical reasons of hygiene for the practice as well as its ritual significance.

By the time of Jesus the Israelite fathers would name their child at the same time as the circumcision, on the child's 8th day of life. This was an acknowledgment of accepting the parental role. Following the birth of a son the mother had to wait 40 days before going to the temple to offer a sacrifice for her purification. The sacrifice of two pigeons was acceptable for poorer people. The Prayer Book service entitled 'Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child' serves a similar purpose, of giving thanks, offering prayers for the family and for the mother's health. The law required the first born to be dedicated to serve God throughout their lives. Simeon had been given special insight that he would see the Messiah before he died.

The beautiful words he uttered have been formalised as the Nunc Dimittis from the first words of the Latin Vulgate translation meaning 'you now dismiss'. Simeon felt that his life was now complete. He prophesied the impact of Jesus upon the people of Israel declaring the positive response to him and his message - also warning the holy family about the future deep anguish they were to suffer.

Anna was known as a prophetess. Other prophetesses named in the bible were Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and the daughters of Philip. Today we would simply call them all male and female "prophets".

Anna – without the 'H' is the same name as Hannah with it and means 'gracious one'.

Anna praised God for Jesus just as Hannah many centuries earlier had praised God for the child Samuel. The temple, built by Herod, was large with many rooms for several purposes. Anna may have been able to live in one of them. During her waking hours she devoted herself to worship.

We can understand Mary pondering on meeting these two special people. She, when newly pregnant, had spent months with her older aunt Elizabeth. She needed the wisdom that older people can have. They are blessings to us all if we are not too busy to listen to the wise voices around us. No matter how old we are a willingness to listen and learn will help to keep us young in attitude and humble in spirit. Older ones can discern in ordinary families God's love and care, providing encouragement, support and wisdom – but not dominance!

One of the blessings of this Parish is the wide age range we have. Olive at 105, Kitty at 100, many in their 80s and 90s, 60s and 70s, as well as the younger ones right down to the toddlers.

As a child I was blessed by knowing Miss Thompson, her faithfulness at worship; the quiet security of her Christian faith.

I wonder who is blessed by you and who, in words, actions and attitude offers a blessing to you.

Ponder these treasures of God's grace in those around you.

To the New Year 2012 we all bring our journey of life and faith for another season. We build on the faith of those before us and those who travel with us.

Let's together look forward with vision and hope to a wonderful year ahead.

I conclude with this ancient blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you:

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.