

First Sunday After Christmas

31.12.2017
By Ruth Harvey

Introduction

How do we 'know' for sure that something is true, or right?
What are our discernment processes?
What are the ways we see 'with the inner eye'?

Our text for today tells the story of Jesus being brought, as an infant to the Temple in Jerusalem by his parents. There they are met by two wise elders, Simeon and the prophet Anna, who recognise Jesus as 'the Lord's Messiah.' A question for us is, what can we learn from the discernment process of Simeon and Anna as they 'recognise' the Messiah?

Text

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will

pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Comment

Po is an unlikely super hero. The star of the animation 'Kung Fu Panda,' Po, a genial, gentle giant of a panda, with a penchant for noodles, finds himself fulfilling an ancient prophecy that he will become a Kung Fu Hero, and will ultimately save his people. It's a film worth a watch, not least in relation to our reading this week. A key moment is when the elder, wise teacher Master Shi Fu notices, with his inner eye, the apparently weak qualities of this unlikely leader and plays to them as strengths. Po goes on to lead his people to safety.

The world is full of unlikely leaders.

Simeon and Anna, wise elders, both knew the child brought to the temple was a special child. They recognized, with their 'inner eye' or 'guided by the Spirit' that this child was the one promised as their leader. We're not told that the child looked particularly different from others, that he stood out physically or that he was trumpeted by a troupe of angels. Clearly, however, there was something about Jesus that triggered the certain knowledge of the elders around him. Through their own methods of discernment including prayer, fasting, devotion and a life of faith Simeon and Anna separately and simultaneously came to a startling realization: the child in front of them was the one foretold, the savior, the messiah.

The Christmas story tells us that there were many who foretold this birth: Mary and Joseph through dreams and angelic visits, ordinary working folk on a hillside, and celestial scholars. With an inner eye, and an ability to read the 'signs of the times' a heady mix of people brought their wisdom to bear and recognized the extraordinary wrapped up in the ordinary in front of them.

What are the ways we see 'with the inner eye'? How do we 'know' for real that something is true, or right? The ability to read the signs of the times, to notice when the ordinary is utterly extraordinary, and to be prompted then to action as a result is a form of discernment.

In her book 'Inner Compass' Margaret Silf offers us a way in to a discernment process. The invitation is to imagine our life as if it were an orange, or an onion—with an outer layer, and further inner layers. The outer layer is the place of the 'givens' in our life, those things which we cannot change: hair/eye colour (despite

dyes and lenses!), genetics, time and place of birth.....

The next layer is for those things in our life over which we have a choice, for example home location, career/work/occupation, what we eat, how we use our time, relationships.... The final layer, once we have acknowledged the 'givens' and the 'choices' is the place of deep identity, of who we are before God. Silf says that it is from this inner place that the 'God-seed' emerges, offering guidance and wisdom for life's path. This God-seed emerges from the core, but travels through and embraces, the 'choices' and the 'givens' in our life which are not discarded, or rejected. This inner core is the place of the inner eye of discernment. Finding techniques and practices that take us to this inner place and ground us in God's love and light is a lifelong task. Simeon and Anna had lived long lives. But we don't need to be old to start the process of discernment (some of the wisest leaders I know are under the age of 30).

Anna and Simeon seemed to be in tune with their onion layers. They saw in this unlikely child the salvation of the world.

I write this as a new leader has been elected to head up the African National Congress. Political leaders across the world are chosen through various processes, many transparent and democratic, some corrupt in the extreme, others somewhere in the middle. It may seem most strange for a political or any leader for that matter to be chosen by discernment alone. But imagine for a moment how it would be if we intentionally, publicly and collectively injected even some of the discernment processes used by Simeon and Anna, and outlined by Margaret Silf, into our political systems. Reading the signs of the times, trusting our 'inner eye', immersing ourselves in our history, stilling ourselves through reflective practice during a national election process could throw up interesting results.

In times of transition and change, which can sometimes trigger disputes, conflict or difficult conversations, it can be important to follow the lead of Simeon and Anna and deploy our discernment techniques of stilling, noticing the 'inner eye', or the promptings of the Holy Spirit and taking time to notice the extraordinary wrapped up in the very ordinary.

Response

How do you 'know' for real that something is true, or right?
What are your discernment processes?
What are the ways you see 'with the inner eye'?

Imagine employing some of Anna and Simeon's discernment practices next time there is an election for a leader of your church, faith community, or constituency. What would this look like, both for you as an individual, and collectively?

Think of the 'unlikely leaders' you know, or know about – people with wisdom who others follow; those who resist leadership. What are their leadership qualities? What leadership qualities do you discern in yourself?

Prayer

Dear Lord of all,

at the turn of year
we pray for courage
to trust our inner eye
as we turn ourselves
towards you,
and a new year.

Grant us the wisdom of Simeon
that we might be guided by your spirit
in the decisions we make.

Grant us the discipline and commitment
of Anna to trust that you will speak
when we need to hear,
that we will listen
when we need to be led.

We pray for all leaders,
the likely, and the unlikely,
that they will find an inner
truth to guide them and us
through this new year, and always.

This we pray in the name of Jesus,
our likely, unlikely leader.

Amen