



Opening Responses

The eternal Word of God is here –
love now has a human face!

God now dwells with us –
justice now has a human face!

God in Jesus sets us free to really live –
joy now has a human face!

Today is a day for new beginnings –
hope now has a human face!

Let us praise and bless the Lord –
God now has a human face! Alleluia! Amen

‘Starter for Ten’ Discussion Question

What are you hoping for in the coming year, and how does this build upon what has come before?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of new beginnings,
you took the risk of coming to us
not in splendour in a grand palace,
but as a small baby born in a stable.
We thank you that you love us so much

that you became fully human
and shared our life in all its ups and downs.
Dwell with us once again this day,
as we celebrate together through the gift of technology,
and give you thanks.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 148 (based on StF 838)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.

He established them for ever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the Lord from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,

princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,

for his name alone is exalted;

his glory is above earth and heaven.

He has raised up a horn for his people,

praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel

who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
They lived in the shadows, but now light is shining on them.
Let us bring into the light of God the darkness of our lives:

On the thoughts, words and deeds for which we're sorry,
let your light shine.

On the hurts, griefs and burdens we carry,
let your light shine.

On the injustices and inequalities of our broken world,
let your light shine.

On the failings of your Church, and the disunity of your Body,
let your light shine.

On the exploitation of your world, and our lack of care for it,
let your light shine.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal,
you have broken the yokes that burden your people,
and through your only begotten Son,
called Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace,
you bring justice and peace.

Thank you that you forgive our mistakes, heal our wounds,
and inspire us to live in the light of your love. **Amen**

Reading

Luke 2:22 – 40

Sermon

Whatever else one might have to say about 2023, it definitely wasn't an uneventful year! Within the church communities I serve, we have dealt with broken boilers and failing flat roofs, laid some much-loved friends to rest and welcomed new members into our midst, and one of the congregations even hosted a royal visit. Looking on the world stage, it has been a year of turbulence, which has witnessed conflict continue to rage in Ukraine and escalate horrifically in Palestine and Israel, the impacts of climate change manifesting themselves in fire, flood and freeze across the world, the disturbing revelations around failures in government exposed by the covid-19 inquiry, and the rise of the Far Right in nations as far apart as Argentina and Holland. In many cases, it is the cost-of-living crisis which has dominated minds and attention, and a report in November from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation records that almost four million people within the UK are living in destitution, unable to meet the most basic of human needs. In the midst of this, we might well ask a question raised by the lyrics of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*: what does it mean for all of our hopes and fears to be met in the birth of Jesus?

Today's reading offers us a helpful place to begin by bringing before us the stories of Simeon and Anna. As was usual in Jewish religious practice, Jesus had been circumcised eight days after his birth, and given his name in accordance with the Angel Gabriel's appearance and instructions to Mary (Luke 2:21). The Law of Moses stated that, following this important ritual, the woman should remain at home for a further thirty-three days before going to the Court of Women to be cleansed (see Leviticus 12:4 – 6). This may seem archaic, but what the *Book of Common Prayer* named the 'Churching of Women' was a widespread practice in this country even as recently as the 1960s. A second ritual performed in the early weeks of a child's life involved

the father bringing them to be dedicated by a priest to YHWH before symbolically buying them back for five shekels, as laid out in Exodus 13:2 – 15. It was not necessary to combine the two rites into a single act, but performing them both in the Jerusalem Temple situates the young Jesus right at the heart of national religious life. While Joseph and Mary were in the complex, they encountered Simeon and Anna. He lived in Jerusalem and had been guided there by the Holy Spirit, while she lived and prayed in the Temple itself.

Luke tells us that what motivated Simeon and Anna was hope. Hope that God would act decisively to restore the people of Israel, so they would again be at home with God and themselves, and would know the peace, prosperity and unity associated with returning from exile. Hope of freedom in the midst of occupation and oppression. Simeon and Anna therefore reflected upon the past and looked to the future. The longing for a Messiah, one from the line of King David who was to lead Israel into freedom and renewal, stretched back to the period of having to learn to sing God's song in the strange land of Babylon. It looked ahead to the fulfilment of God's promises, especially those made in the pages of Second Isaiah and the Psalms, for the comfort and peace that would shine out before the nations. As happens also on other occasions in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, which probably come from an early Jewish-Christian source, Simeon lays it on the table by bursting into song. Anna tells anyone open to hear that Jesus was the sign of coming redemption. Both recognised that the 'hopes and fears of all the years were met' in that child, in Mary's arms and Joseph's care, who embodied salvation.

The story of Simeon and Anna is a great one to ponder at the ending of one year as we reflect upon the past, and as we look to the future at the beginning of another. God's people had seen disappointment and struggle as they journeyed through life, and knew something of what it meant to suffer and hurt, as well as feel joy and contentment. The challenges of Jesus's day were different to those of ours today,

but what always remains the same is God's steadfast love and care. By his showing up in our neighbourhood as one of us, God-in-Christ reveals the passion with which God loves each and every one of us and the value God places upon us. Simeon and Anna recognised a part of this vision as they responded to Jesus, drawing together that longing from the past and the hope for the future. As we reflect upon their intertwined stories, I invite you to begin this new year by taking time out to ponder the following questions:

- What do you carry with you into the new year from your past, for better or worse?
- What do you hope for from this year ahead, both in your own life and for those closest to you?
- What are your hopes and fears for our world in this year, and how might your faith speak into them?

Prayers of Intercession

God of hope, we bring our prayers for others to you.

For those parts of the world caught up in war and conflict, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those without clean water to drink or enough to eat, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who are homeless, or whose homes are not safe, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who are lonely, especially the elderly and poorly, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who will reluctantly spend this season alone, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those who are bereaved, or experiencing other losses, God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those for whom 'family' is a scary or sad word,
God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

For those we know who are suffering in mind, body or spirit,
God of hope, **hear our prayer.**

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of hope, help us to be answers to prayer,
and a people who show the world
what your justice, peace and love look like,
through what we say and how we live.
In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Go in the light of faith and shine boldly.
Go in the strength of faith and be bold.
Go with the blessing of God the Father,
the peace of Jesus the Son,
and the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen