

Luke 2:36-40

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 December 2013

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] not always in the background, the chilling shadow of euthanasia, or as it has now been rebranded, assisted dying as one avenue that may be seen to lessen or potentially to lessen the burden.

That's a scary thought. What about the church? Do we as Christians have a different perspective to being old, to the elderly? Listen to two possible descriptions of a given congregation.

Something you might hear as you speak to somebody who's gone to visit somewhere else, and they've been at church, and they're telling you about the experience. Here are two possible descriptions. Somebody saying to you, oh, that church, it's full of young people. Okay, that's one. And then you have somebody say, oh, that church, it's full of old people. Now, which is the positive description?

How would you take that? I think we all know what would be understood as being the positive description. If it's full of young people, that's great. No, of course, it's great for a church to be full of young people. Don't get me wrong. But this almost default position that, well, lots of old people, that's not very good. That's not a positive thing. So, maybe we need to ourselves think a little about what attitude we have to the elderly, to being old, to growing old, and to what that involves.

Now, why am I saying all this? Well, one striking and intriguing feature of the birth narratives in the Gospels is the place of honor given to old people. Of the six named pious Israelites we encounter in the Gospel narratives of the birth, the birth narratives. All of them, with the exception of Joseph and Mary, are old. Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. It's very explicitly stated, and they're described to us as old. Simeon, who although we're not actually told everything would suggest that he was also very old, he speaks of being ready to die. Dismiss your servant in peace, and everything would point in the direction of him having been elderly. And then we have Anna.

[2 : 2 1] I began by asking, are you very old? Maybe you thought that wasn't very polite. Well, Luke, in a language that is none too delicate, describes Anna in those words. She was very old. There we can see that in verse 36. And it is Anna that we want to consider and, I trust, learn from this evening.

But before we proceed any further, let's just try and establish how old Anna was. How old, in Luke's estimation, is very old. There are actually two possibilities that the language that Luke uses, allows for. She may have been 84. That is certainly the way in which the version that we're reading from, the New International Version, understands what Luke says. There in verse 37, well, from verse 36, we have the evidence, if you want, that would allow us to arrive at a conclusion.

She was very old. She had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was 84. Or, as you can see in the footnote, it gives you the alternative. The alternative is, and then was a widow for 84 years. And the language that Luke employs allows either possibilities. So, the options are that she was 84 when she is described here by Luke, or she'd been a widow for 84 years. So, there we need to do a little bit of math. It's not very complicated. We have to make an assumption of how old she was when she married. Let's say she was 15, 15, 16. That wouldn't have been an unusual age to get married in those days. She was married for seven years. So, let's say she was 15, plus 7, 22, plus 84, 106. So, that's the alternative. Now, of those two, generally, even translators, commentators, opt for the younger age of 84. It seems to me, I may be wrong, but it seems to me for no other reason than they deem it to be more likely, more believable, more probable, whereas 106 seems, well, that's not very plausible. I have to say for myself, in an account of the birth of Jesus that is replete with the extraordinary and the supernatural, it doesn't seem to me at all implausible that Anna may well have been 106 or thereabouts.

You are free to take your pick, but for myself, I'll opt for 106 or so. Well, if that was the case, if she was indeed over 100, I wonder what was the secret of her longevity. You know, sometimes we see when somebody reaches their 100th birthday. In the past, that was an extraordinary occurrence. It's now becoming not that uncommon, but it's still quite an achievement, if we can call it that.

And what's quite common, you sometimes see reports on TV or you hear of it or a party that there's been for somebody who's reached that grand old age of 100. And one of the questions that is often posed to the person themselves is, you know, what's the secret? What's the secret of having reached such a ripe old age? And you hear all kinds of answers, sometimes humorous ones, you know, a glass of brandy a day, or I was reading of one lady who's 107, and she was asked that question, you know, what's the secret of your longevity? And her answer was, one big piece of strawberry shortcake every day. Well, I don't know.

[6 : 21] It may be, it may work. I don't know at what age you have to start doing that for it to work. But anyway, that was her answer to that question. What about Anna? I wonder what was the secret of her longevity. I wonder if it was fasting and praying, those things that she has described as doing day and night by Luke. What we can say is that Anna's was a life well lived. And we could very appropriately say of this godly woman, whose name means grace, that she knew what it was to age gracefully, in the fullest and richest sense of that expression. And perhaps if we had to find one word to describe her life and person, it would be the word faithful. What I want us to do very briefly this evening is to consider in what ways and circumstances she was faithful. And as we do, to thank God for her and others like her, those who are old or very old and who have been used of God to help us in our faith, to teach us, to serve as an example and as an encouragement to us. So, to thank God for Anna and others like her, but also ask God that we too, as God grants us life and years, that we too might age like Anna, that we might age gracefully. At the end of the day, we're all aging. It's just a case of at what stage in the process we're at. So, she was faithful. Let's just notice a few ways in which she was faithful. The first thing I want you to notice is that she was faithful in the midst of personal tragedy. We are told very little about Anna, but one of the things we are told is of how she was widowed. And again, we can reasonably presume that that was at a very young age. She was married to her husband for seven years. If indeed she did marry at an age that would have been common, 15, 16, then as a very young woman in her early twenties, she tragically loses her husband. We're not told if she had any children with her husband. We do know that she never remarried. That might suggest that she was childless. It seems unlikely that a woman with children would have remained unmarried, having been widowed at such a young age. Of course, we don't know. We're speculating. But it does seem unlikely that she would have remained unmarried had she had children to care for and provide for.

And so, this was, by any measure, a very tragic turn of events, a very tragic circumstance that Anna had to face at such a young age. And such loss can produce not only sadness, of course, it ought to produce sadness, but it can, not always does, of course, but it can produce bitterness and loss of faith.

But not so with Anna. We don't know the reasons why she never remarried, but perhaps it was with a view of her husband that she was able to be able to be able to do. And she is able to dedicate all her time to fasting and praying night and day, as she is described as doing. If that was her motivation, and in suggesting that that may have been her motivation, I'm not suggesting that such a life dedicated in its entirety to praying and fasting is intrinsically more spiritual or pleasing to God than serving God as a wife and mother or indeed as a husband and father. But we mention it simply to stress that Anna remained faithful in the face of personal tragedy and loss. And in that, she serves as a helpful challenge and encouragement and example to us who also know what it is often to face difficulties and challenges and sadness in our life, perhaps not as dramatic as was the case with Anna.

So, faithful in the face of personal tragedy, but we can also say of Anna that she was faithful in meditating on the Scriptures. Notice how she is described. There in verse 36 we read, there was also a prophetess. Now, as I was just thinking about this this week, and I hadn't anticipated speaking about this this evening, so I hadn't given any prior thought to this. But, so as I was thinking about it, what came to my mind and what struck me was how just last week we were considering Zechariah's song. And in that song he addresses his son, John the Baptist. And we stress there that one of the things that he says, it highlights the great privilege that was John's in being called a prophet of the Most High. And one of the things we stress was that this was a particular privilege

given the prophetic silence that there had been over centuries prior to John the Baptist. And so that was something that was stressed. I think it was a legitimate stress. And yet it struck me as curious that here we have Anna, born decades before John the Baptist, and yet she is described as a prophetess.

It's intriguing that she would be given that designation, but also frustrating in a sense, because so much is left unsaid. Clearly there are good reasons for that. And in a way, what comes to mind are perhaps more questions rather than answers. But some of the questions that come to my mind with regard to the way in which she is described as a prophetess are as follows. Was this designation given to her by others on the grounds of her godly life and knowledge of the Scriptures? Somebody who was constantly speaking about and referring to the prophetic Scriptures? Perhaps very much in the context of the long-awaited Messiah, a woman who was knowledgeable in the prophets. And so, she came to be described by others as a prophetess. It may be, did she dedicate her life to teaching others, perhaps younger women, the Scriptures along the lines recommended by Paul in his letter to Timothy? That this is a very useful activity to which widows to which widows could dedicate themselves, teaching younger women the Scriptures.

[13:05] Did her prophetic ministry begin following her encounter with the Messiah child? You know, she's described as a prophetess, but we're not told if she had been a prophetess all her life. If indeed this was an office that was given to her by God, when did that happen? We go on to read of how she spoke about the Bible, when she was a prophetess. And I wonder whether her being called a prophetess is an indication of that it was at this point that she began to exercise this gift of prophecy. Of course, we don't know the answer to that question. If she was a prophetess in the full sense of the word, a prophet, what were her prophecies, and why are none preserved for us? Simeon, who isn't described as a prophet, is one who speaks prophetically. We have his words, words that we can describe as prophetic. In this very chapter, we've read them, but we have no such words recorded from the lips of Anna. So, lots of questions. We don't know the answers to these questions, but I think we can with confidence assert that she was a woman faithful and meditating on the Scriptures. And that certainly is evidenced by her messianic expectation, grounded, we can be sure, in the prophetic writings. Why was she waiting along with others, perhaps very few others? Why was she waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem? Well, because she knew from the Scriptures, she knew from the prophetic writings that a Messiah had been promised, that a Messiah would come. And so, grounded in that knowledge, she awaits expectantly His coming.

Faithful in meditating on the Scriptures. What a good thing it would be if we, as we grow old, it could be described in such a way. What more can we say about Anna? Well, I think we can say this. That she was also faithful in her love and burden for Jerusalem. How do we know that she loved Jerusalem and had a burden for Jerusalem? That she loved Israel, that she loved God's people? How do we know that?

Well, she was clearly part of the faithful remnant that was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem, as Luke tells us. Now, this in itself is evidence that she recognized Jerusalem's need for redemption. You don't await redemption for Jerusalem if you aren't aware that Jerusalem stands in great need of redemption. She recognized Jerusalem's plight. She grieved at its apostate state. She was in the temple every day, and she witnessed every day how many of those who were religious leaders of the nation had no spiritual concern or interest or seriousness in what they did. And she had to witness that. And she grieved as she saw these things round about her. Anna with Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Really, another way of saying the same thing that is said by Luke concerning the redemption of Jerusalem. And she was waiting for the consolation of Israel. These are the words that are used to describe Simeon in verse 25. She too, for she saw so clearly Israel's need of consolation. But also we're told that she dedicated herself to fasting and praying. And an obvious question that arises is, well, what was she praying for? Why was she fasting? What were the matters that drove her, that led her to spend her life praying and fasting? Well, no doubt many things. But at the heart, surely, of what concerned her and what burdened her was Israel itself, Jerusalem itself, for the coming of salvation to God's people through the promised Messiah. This is what occupied her time and her concern as she prayed and fasted night and day. I wonder if we share Anna's discernment as she saw all that was awry amongst those who claimed to be God's people, and if we share her accompanying burden for the good and the welfare and the health of God's church. Faithful in her love and burden for

[17 : 50] Jerusalem, but also, and all of these things of course overlap and are related, faithful in her prayer for the coming of Messiah. As we have just noted, Anna was a woman of prayer. She prayed constantly and earnestly for the coming of Messiah, and earnestly for the coming of Messiah. She prayed, Luke tells us, night and day. And her persevering and faithful prayer ministry, if we want to call it that, was grounded in her knowledge of the promises of Scripture concerning a coming Messiah, but also further kindled, I imagine, by the revealing work of the Holy Spirit in her own day and generation. You see, Anna's expectation concerning a coming Messiah was grounded in the Scripture, certainly, but it was also grounded in the fact that in her own lifetime, the Holy Spirit had begun to move and to speak and to reveal, in a particular way that she, I am sure, would have been familiar with or knowledgeable of. I'm thinking of Simeon, to give just the obvious example within this very passage. We're told in this passage we've read of how the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death before the coming of Messiah, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And it seems inconceivable that within that, I imagine, relatively small faithful remnant who shared that expectation of Messiah coming, that Simeon's promise that he had received would not have been something that he shared with others, and that Anna would have been familiar with it. And so, she has the Scriptures that speak of a coming Messiah, but to kindle her excitement and expectation, we have the Holy Spirit in her own day, revealing what is soon to come to pass. As the Holy Spirit spoke to Simeon, can we not imagine, even though we're not told, that he spoke also to Anna? She, after all, is the prophetess. Simeon is not described in that language as a prophet, but she is a prophetess. And so, perhaps, in addition to the Scriptures, in addition to what Simeon shared, she herself had been given this assurance that Messiah was soon coming. And so, she prays with greater excitement, with greater urgency, knowing that soon Messiah will come.

She is one described as fulfilling this prophetic ministry. She was a prophetess, and so it's not unreasonable to imagine that as such she had this special revelation given to her that confirmed the scriptures that she was familiar with. She was faithful in her prayer for the coming of Messiah. Faithful in prayer. Now, there's no doubt, as we think of this faithfulness as she prayed and fasted night and day, there's no doubt that her circumstances, her providentially ordered circumstances, allowed Anna to dedicate herself to fasting and prayer in a way and to an extent that would not have been possible had she lived what we might call, for want of a better description, a normal life. It's also true that even within that life that she had lived that was unusual in terms of its circumstances, as she grew old, her advanced years, though they no doubt brought their share of limitations as advanced years do, also granted to Anna a liberty to pray night and day. And is that not the case? Is it not for many, a blessed opportunity and circumstance? That in old age, there is that opportunity and time to pray.

That's not to make excuses for those of us who are younger, but nonetheless, it is true. And how often have we met and been blessed by older people whose circumstances are such that they are able to pray in a manner and with a dedication that perhaps others of us are not able to do or certainly don't do.

And we think of those who perhaps even aren't able to be with us this evening, those of God's people who are housebound, and yet in that state, with the limitations that come with it, nonetheless, often that allows them to dedicate themselves to serving God and His church as those who pray. Well, Anna was faithful in prayer, faithful in praying for the coming of Messiah, faithful in prayer. Faithful also, and we just have a couple more things we want to say, faithful in giving thanks for answered prayer.

[22 : 54] In verse 38, we're told that Anna came up to them at that very moment, coming up to them at that very moment. She gave thanks to God. Now, the question arises there is, what moment? To what moment is Luke referring? And I think that the reasonable conclusion would be that he's referring to the moment when Simeon took the child in his arms and erupted in prophetic praise as recorded for us in verses 29 to 32. So, Anna is there. She sees Simeon receive this child. She hears Simeon speak the words that he spoke. And as one who we were suggesting was already privy to the promise that had been made to Simeon. And now, as she hears Simeon speak these words, well, she puts two and two together, and it's very clear to her who the child is. This is the long-awaited Messiah. And so, at that very moment, she approaches them, and what is she doing? She is giving thanks to God. Why is she giving thanks to God? For what is she giving thanks to God? Well, she's giving thanks to God for the coming of Messiah, for the consolation of Israel that is now at hand, for the redemption of Jerusalem, that is soon to be accomplished. She is giving

thanks for answered prayer, that which she had prayed for year by year and decade by decade, prayer and fasting night and day. And now there is an answer. And so, Anna, faithful in praying, but faithful also in giving thanks for answered prayer. But one final thing that we can say about Anna, and perhaps what is said of Anna, this final thing that is said of Anna, is the most, what shall we say, the most intriguing or the one that allows us the most opportunity to apply to all of us, be we young or old. And we can say this, that she was faithful in speaking about the child. This is the very intriguing language, or the very telling language that Luke uses about Anna following her encounter with the child Jesus. In verse 38, we read, coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

She spoke about Jesus. I wonder what she said. You might think that a lot of what we've been doing this evening is asking questions and wondering and not giving answers. But I do wonder, what did she say? Did she speak about all that the prophets taught concerning the Messiah? Did she speak about the words of Simeon, those recorded for us, and perhaps others that were not being recorded for us? Did she speak prophetically as a prophetess concerning Jesus as the Messiah and the work that he would soon accomplish? I don't know all that she said, but I'm sure that she spoke about the child with joy and excitement and expectation. It must have been quite a sight to witness this centenarian bubbling with excitement as she spoke about the child. She spoke about the child. And before going any further, what about us? Do we speak about the child with joy and excitement and expectation?

But notice to who she spoke to, because it doesn't just say that she spoke about the child, but we're told that she spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. I wonder if the reason that that was her audience was that she was led by the Holy Spirit to only speak to them or simply that others weren't interested. And so, though she wanted to speak to others and maybe attempted to speak to others, they just didn't want to hear. That's possible. I wonder how long she lived following her encounter with Jesus. How many people did she speak to? She must have spoken every day about the child. I can't imagine that a day would have gone by following this encounter with Jesus that she didn't speak about the child. But to how many people? To dozens? To hundreds? And the question is an intriguing one if we relate it to the visit of the Magi that we were looking at this morning. Let's just think about that very fleetingly. Why is that an intriguing question? Well, the presentation of Jesus at the temple would have been when he was about 40 days old, what we're reading about and considering this evening. Jesus, about 40 days old. And from this point onwards, Anna spoke about the child. She spoke about the child, and I'm suggesting she'd have done that every day. We don't know how long she lived after this occurred, but we can presume that she still lived for some time after this incident. Now, the Magi, the wise men, appeared in Jerusalem in all probability several months later, up to two years, but certainly several months later, by which time we might have thought that Anna, as well as Simeon, if he was still alive, more likely that he may have died. He does say to God, dismiss your servant in peace, but certainly Anna, is likely that they would have told many people about Jesus. Anna's speaking about the child. She's doing so all the time. She's in the temple every day. She's speaking about the child. And it seems to me unlikely that the men that Herod spoke to, when the wise men came and said, we're looking for the one born king, and we read this morning how Herod called the chief priests and the teachers of the law to inquire about this and to ask where the Messiah was to be born. It seems to me unlikely that these men would have heard nothing of what Anna, and possibly Simeon, were saying. And indeed others who were spoken to by Anna, and who then in turn told others. You see, they're in the very same place, the same city, the same temple precinct. It just seems unlikely to me that they wouldn't have heard what Anna was saying, what Simeon was saying. And I mention all of this, one, because it's quite intriguing to think about these things, but I mention it because if indeed that is so, how much greater the guilt of these men when the Magi come and say, we have come, we're looking for the one born king of the Jews. And they far from, even for a moment, thinking, well, hang on, what about what that woman Anna is saying? What about that prophetess? It's always going on and speaking about the child. Might it be? No, rather, for their own foolish and rebellious reasons, choose to ignore what we're suggesting they may well have heard about.

[29 : 54] If this is so, it is a sobering thing for these men who knew so much and yet did not do anything with what they knew. Well, I leave that for you to maybe think about. But back, and with this we finish, back to Anna's faithfulness in speaking about the child.

And in this, surely we have a challenge and an encouragement for all believers, young and old. Do we, will we speak about the child? Speak about the child who grew into man. Speak about Jesus to all those God places in our path to listen. Anna was faithful, faithful in all of these ways. Anna aged gracefully. The one whose name means grace, aged gracefully. And so we thank God for Anna. We thank God for the elderly in our own lives who have been used to bless us and to serve us and to help us. The elderly in our own congregation who aged gracefully and usefully in the service of God and His church. And may we all do likewise. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray.