

CORI AGM

OMAGH

SUNDAY OCTOBER 12, 2014

SESSION TWO

HOLDERS OF THE PROMISE

Some time ago now I heard Sheila Cassidy being interviewed and some of her words have remained with me. You will remember her especially because of her time in Chile under the Pinochet regime. On her return she became involved in ministering to the terminally ill. Out of her experience in the hospice movement she has become increasingly aware of the importance of keeping watch, of being present with and for those who are crossing over from one life to another, of simply being there. Often, in such a situation, it is the only act of love that we can offer and perhaps it is the best. This being totally present and aware, this keeping watch, with the eyes of our hearts wide open to mystery and the ears of our hearts attuned to the faintest whisper of the Divine, is part of what our journey of faith is all about. The more we keep vigil, the more our spirits are awakened, then we recognize our belonging to a beloved community that is far vaster than we could ever imagine and, at the same time, so intimate that our hearts are overwhelmed. There comes a point, in keeping watch, where we 'cross over' into another life of deeper awareness, greater love and more courageous risk-taking. We 'die before we die'. This keeping watch could be described as one form of prayer.

Throughout the ages God kept vigil over his human family, in particular over those whom he had chosen to play a key role in the story of his unfolding relationship with humankind. The name that our early forefathers in the faith gave to him was the name he had revealed to Moses – 'I Am.' When Moses was commissioned to go to Egypt and rescue the Israelites

from slavery under Pharaoh, he was a very wary recruit! He raised all sorts of objections, including the fact that the people wouldn't listen to him because they wouldn't know who sent him. God replied, "I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them 'I AM has sent me to you.'—This will be my name forever; it has always been my name, and it will be used throughout all generations." Out of his unfailing love and faithfulness, down through the ages God kept watch, not in a remote heaven but closer to them than most of them ever realized. He saw their struggling attempts at faithfulness, their stumbling into rebellion and disobedience. Again and again in their distress he heard their cries and rescued them. His yearning and desire were given voice through the courageous women and men we call the prophets. Theirs was not a sentimental message but often that of the Jealous Lover (jealous in the positive sense), stark in its call to return to the Beloved. They were not popular and often reluctant to voice what had been revealed to them, but their relationship with God was stronger than their own fears. They too kept watch and their 'Thus says the Lord' was a constant call to wakefulness, to the sense of presence. For God for them, as for us, was and always is the 'I AM.' And at a particular point in our human history, God the ever present I AM chose to break into the limitations of time and space, taking on our form and likeness – with one sole purpose – to reveal to us how much we are loved. His patient, totally attentive, passionate vigil translated itself into action. God, in the person of his beloved son, crossed the threshold from heaven to earth so that we might recognize him, might be given the freedom to know ourselves, in our hearts as well as our heads, members of his family, at home in the house of the Lord.

When I read between the lines in the nativity accounts in the Gospels, one of the things that strikes me is that all of the main protagonists kept watch. They were people who were

attentive, awake. Among them are two, a man and a woman, who appear on the pages of only one of the Gospels and reference to them is tantalisingly brief. They were senior citizens, nearing the end of their days. Their names are Simeon and Anna, Simeon described as righteous and very devout, Anna named as a prophet who actually lived in the Temple, continually praying and fasting. She had been married but after seven years her husband had died and she was now 84 years old. They were both people of long experience and wisdom who, in spite of all the tragedies and traumas of their national history, including the present military occupation by Rome, had kept hope alive in their hearts. This was not a hope rooted in their own leaders but a hope that was rooted and grounded in God and so their spirits were on tiptoe with expectancy. They believed that God would act, that the promised Messiah would come. Simeon in particular trusted that before he died he would see the promise fulfilled. Over many long years they prayed and they waited – in expectancy. Theirs was no dull passivity but a passionate waiting, filled with a total trust in the promise of God. They were numbered among ‘the quiet in the land’ – those who prayed and believed that God would send a Messiah to deliver his people. No one would have taken very much notice of them. They had become almost like institutions or part of the furniture around the Temple – ‘old Simeon on the verge of dotage’ or ‘frail, aged Anna on the brink of death.’ They were no longer ‘important’. In the eyes of their world they no longer had any contribution to make. Everyone else around them was busy with their projects, rushing, being noticed. These two lived in the shadows of old age. But in the upside down kingdom of God, they were its shining lights. And on that eventful day, which probably started out just like any other, it was to them that the revelation was given. This was the sacrament of encounter for which they had been praying and waiting for so long. Throughout their lives they had kept vigil. They saw what others could not see because they

lived in the awareness of having been seen. They had grown into a deeper and deeper awareness of God who is Infinite Love. They were gifted with recognition because they had been faithful. They were also graced with a deep humility, that which always accompanies a person of deep faith and is a true sign of greatness. Others would have seen the peasant couple and their child enter the Temple but would never even have entertained for a moment the notion that here in their midst was the Saviour of the world. Can you imagine how it must have been? Simeon as usual in the Temple courts only half conscious of the usual bustle around him, the other part always attuned to the Spirit would have sensed that something was happening that only those with eyes to see and ears to hear would have understood. He saw beyond the externals and in this ordinary couple with their baby coming to fulfil the religious requirements after a birth, he knew in a place beyond all formal knowing that he was in the presence of the Saviour of the world. The God of surprises had shown up in such a hidden way and old Simeon's heart overflowed with rejoicing.

Simeon sang out his song, that song that has reverberated throughout the centuries ever since "Lord now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen." On that day he proclaimed the child as the one who would be the light for all people – not just for some. God had sent his Son for the whole world, without exceptions. There were no exclusion zones. In the coming of this child God was acting for everyone. For the Gentiles revelation, for the Israelites glory – God's promises fulfilled. This was a message of inclusion, of hope, of unity – but also of the cost of embracing such a gift. There would be those who would not or could not accept the all-embracing nature of such a love and would seek to destroy it. Perhaps it is of the mysterious nature of joy that it is always laced through with pain – the deeper the night the brighter the stars. But for now, it was 'star

time'. A new era had dawned. It was the season of outrageous hope. And it was old Simeon's eyes that had seen this wonder. It was to him the revelation had been given. Anna appeared and added her praise to that of Simeon. Just imagine fasting and praying for well over 60 years! It shows a lot of commitment and trust, doesn't it? You might have thought that she would get weary of it all and wonder if she would ever see anything change. It would have been easy for her to have given up, or to have got lost in self-pity or preoccupied with the frailties that accompany old age. But no; what exudes from Anna is the vibrancy of her walk with God. I like to think that she and Simeon were well acquainted, that they would sometimes share their longings and their hopes with each other. I like to think that they were God's secret agents in the Temple, who then went public, regardless of reaction, on that blessed day when they met with Jesus and knew. Can you imagine the busyness, bustle and importance of a papal audience at St Peter's with everybody wanting to see or be seen – but all looking in the wrong place, if they are searching at all? I think it was a bit like that. The others in that Temple Court would have taken no notice of Simeon and Anna, or if they did glance in their direction would have dismissed their excited behaviour as a little thing of no consequence. The only two who did notice and were profoundly moved were the couple, Mary and Joseph. For them, the reactions of Simeon and Anna must have been a huge assurance and quiet affirmation of the journey to which they had committed themselves. These two in this eternity moment emerged from the shadows to proclaim the greatest good news the world would ever hear. And, having done so, they could go in peace, their waiting over.

Simeon and Anna were nearing the end of their earthly lives but this was a time of new beginnings, not only for them but for everyone who ever lived. The message that rings out

from them is that the best is yet to be. All that has gone before has been leading up to this pivotal point in history and for everyone who ever lives, life will never be the same. Simeon may have sung his nunc dimmittis in a relatively quiet manner. Anna proclaimed the 'good news' to anyone who would listen. I think it is remarkable that we have recorded for us the fact that this moment of recognition and awareness came to a woman and a man at the same time. In revealing his presence to both in the form of the child, God was declaring that both are included, have equal place in the announcing of Good News. Also quite beautiful is the fact that these two were very elderly. The percentage of very elderly people in our society increases all the time, many of them waiting out their time in institutional care. In this madly busy world, there is often little time to appreciate lives that have been lived or the wisdom of the years. Recent surveys have shown that one of the biggest health hazards in today's society is loneliness, especially among the ageing population. As the years progress vulnerability and frailty increase and can be taken advantage of by the unscrupulous or the insensitive or uncaring. That which we regard as endearing or delightful at one end of life we view with distaste or frustration at the other. And yet it is a process that everyone goes through. There is no escape unless our lives are cut short by some tragedy or unexpected illness. I think that there is a challenge here – a twofold challenge. Firstly, recognising that most of us are either in our latter years or are fast approaching such a state, how can we begin to change attitudes towards those of advanced years so that society may see them as a gift rather than a burden? And, secondly, whatever stage we're at on the journey, how can we so live that our remaining years will not be dominated by loneliness, negativity and loss but by a vibrant faith and an expectancy that the best is yet to be, that vibrancy and hope that characterized Simeon and Anna? One of the 'youngest' old people I know is Jean Vanier who at the age of 87 says that growing old is

such an enjoyable experience. I believe he finds it so for many reasons, one being that his life has always embraced the vulnerable and little of this world as somehow being special to the heart of God. Another is that his meeting with Jesus continues on a daily basis at a deeper and deeper level. You cannot be in his presence and fail to be touched by the transparency of this image bearer of Jesus. Even if he lived in solitary confinement he would not be lonely because of the mutuality of relationship between himself and the beloved. As it is, people still flock from all over the world to visit and be in his presence. He has a touch of Simeon and Anna about him. He announces good news still, like Anna, and, like Simeon, he is also ready to depart in peace – because his eyes have seen.

As I indicated earlier, one of the things I know that brings sadness and a sense of deep loss to many brothers and sisters of the religious orders is to see how these orders are declining. With one or two exceptions, there is almost the sound of a dying gasp – at least in the Western world. The majority of religious are now in the age bracket of Simeon and Anna. It is so hard, I am sure, to look back and think of the days when there were so many, when there was zeal and energy and excitement as you pushed the boundaries of the kingdom ever outwards by your faithful witness and loving service. Would you think it naïve or strange for me to say, ‘Don’t think like that. The best is yet to be.’ You have one tremendous and priceless resource that other secular institutions do not have. You have the power house of prayer. When physical strength goes, when numbers decline, when what you knew your particular charism to be is taken over by other bodies or institutions, when disillusionment threatens to overwhelm you, when old certainties are taken over by confusion, when it doesn’t seem as if anything could alter the decline or disinterest in things of faith, you still have this amazing resource. I don’t just mean observing our prayer times

and praying the prayers of the church. All of these are vital and necessary, but, beyond all that is the love relationship between yourself and God, the prayer of letting go, the prayer of silence that, paradoxically, is also one filled with vibrant expectancy. It is such faithful ongoing prayer that contributes to the seismic shift in the unseen world denoting a new day of inclusion, of peace, of unity, the day whose dawning was witnessed by Simeon and Anna. Think what might happen if all the little communities, the religious houses in the island of Ireland were seized with the vision of such vibrant, expectant prayer and made it their chief priority. You, too, could sing out your *nunc dimmittis* for your eyes would have seen. You could move on into the next unexplored mystery of after life with your heads held high, with a victory song of suffering love in your hearts and an alleluia on your lips!

Let's expect that, as we keep watch, we will hear a different incantation than the incessant noise of materialism and despair – instead a song of praise and hope. Let's expect that we will see a different portent than the menacing shapes of fear and terror that characterize the world of 2014. As we allow ourselves to be fully present to the presence of the I AM, out of love, then the radiance of God's glory will begin to shine upon us and through us. As we are faithful in such a little way, in our ordinariness let us be prepared to be surprised by extraordinary joy. And let us not lose faith or cause others to lose faith by our lack of awareness, by our failure to keep vigil. In these days of apprehension about the future of the world itself, of wars and rumours of wars, of torture, terrorism and disease, of economic collapse and rumblings of revolution, could it be possible that we could bring whatever is our particular giftedness, our passion, our all into focus with this one intent – that we might be awake enough and alert enough to see what God is doing and to join in, that we might not miss the moment. If we, as Christians, cannot be bearers of hope – who can? Are we

vigil people who can declare by our lives that a new age is dawning? Here in Northern Ireland you could be God's secret agents who, as you keep vigil in faithful, expectant prayer can yet be the first fruits of the new future you envision. So, let me close this with a few questions for you to ponder. Is your hope rooted and grounded in God? Are your spirits on tiptoe with expectancy? What would you like to 'see' before you depart in peace? It could be that to you fresh revelation is given. Are you ready for the God of surprises? Do you share your hopes, dreams and longings with each other, or only your despair? Can you with the eyes of faith right now see and declare that the best is yet to be? Are you a community of such outrageous hope? Dear Sisters and Brothers – the Master is here and wants to see you.