



Will we recognise the revelation?

A sermon by Revd Will Morris

Readings: Malachi 3.1-5; Hebrews 2.14-end; Luke 2.22-40

Some of you may have been to Woody Allen's latest movie, *Blue Jasmine*. It's funny in parts, touching in others – and it's also rather scary. Jasmine's life is falling apart, all the money has gone, her husband having been disgraced has killed himself, her sister and other family members on whom she must rely are alienated or pushed away. Yet still she clings to the belief that somehow she can make it back – be in charge, in control – by telling stories, drinking, fooling herself, trying to fool others. But she doesn't and she can't, and it continues to unravel. Help is available, but she can't see it, won't accept it. She blunders onwards, downwards, blindly, faster, deeper.

So, how does this relate to Simeon and Anna and the revelation of God? Well, let me ask you one of those classic first year philosophy questions: "If a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" Well, you might think, obviously it does. It falls, it crashes, there's a huge noise. But go a little deeper, and perhaps it's not so clear. The vibrating waves of energy are there, but, some argue, sound itself only exists when it is experienced or perceived. For it to be a sound, as opposed to a simply a series of energy waves, it must be heard by somebody. Now let me ask a second question: can there be revelation if no one sees it; if no one recognises that something is being revealed?

Epiphany (and the Christmas season), which ends today, has been a time of revelation: to the shepherds, to the wise men, slightly out of chronological order to those at Jesus' baptism and, today, to Simeon and to Anna. But does the revelation exist solely in the fact of God becoming man and appearing in front of them, or is it revelation because they saw it, and because they understood it? What if the shepherds had decided they were seeing things in the night sky, and just stayed on the hillside? What if the wise men had decided that the star was, well, just a star? And what if Simeon and Anna had seen nothing more than the young son of a peasant family up from the countryside, just like all the other thousands of boys they had seen? God would still have been made incarnate; Jesus would still have been born, lived and died. But would any of this have been a revelation if there had been no one there to see it, and if no one had recognised it and reacted to it?

One of the main themes not just of Epiphany, but of all of the Gospels, is how people react to and with Jesus. He wasn't an actor, performing to a passive audience; his ministry wasn't a series of endless miracles intended to bribe or bludgeon us into belief. It was a two-way street. He offered to take our sins, but only if we were prepared to give them to him. And for that to happen, we have to see, to realise, to recognise what is happening.

But this isn't a problem for us, is it? We're here, we're worshipping, we recognise. We have perceived the revelation. We're fine – aren't we?

What Simeon perceives when he sees the boy Jesus is salvation; what Anna sees is redemption. The Messiah who came to save us all. The Saviour who would redeem us from sin by his life, death, and resurrection, thereby reconciling us to God, to each other, and to ourselves. But for that to happen, these gifts have to be seen and recognised – and seen and recognised by us today, not just by Simeon and Anna 2,000 years ago.

Before, however, we blithely assume that we will always see and recognise, we need to realise why this may actually be rather hard. Simeon and Anna, leaders of their community, somehow saw, somehow recognised the revelation of God in that particular young son of that particular peasant family. But, the subsequent Gospel stories of the years of Jesus' ministry are full of people like Simeon and Anna who completely failed to see it. These others are – perhaps like us – religiously observant, refined, educated, respected, honoured leaders of their communities. And they get it dead wrong. They seek to deter Jesus, to deflect him, and when that fails, to kill him. Here is the hope of the world standing right in front of them, but there is no realisation, no recognition; there is no revelation. Time and again Jesus says to these leaders: “you have eyes, but do not see; you have ears, but do not hear.” With eyes and ears shut, the tree falls in the forest, but there is no sound; God appears, but is invisible to them.

But, you might say, we accept the revelation, we have faith, we do see. But do we really? This is not just about acknowledging the historical Jesus who lived 2,000 years ago; that's been done. Now it's about seeing and understanding what Jesus means today. And here's why it might be difficult. It's conventional wisdom that to be a strong, fully-rounded human being I have to be in charge, I have to be self-contained, I can show no weakness. “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” But of course that's exactly the mistake, the trap that Jasmine walks into in Woody Allen's movie. Refusing to see she needs help, refusing to accept it. And it's a trap I suspect many of us also fall into, me included. So when we think this way, words like salvation and redemption simply don't resonate, because those things can only come from someone else, not from us. And yet, that's what Simeon and Anna perceived. What was revealed to them.

The salvation, the redemption that we need to be prepared to see when the moment comes, is the restoration of wholeness in our lives once we are freed from the chains of sin and guilt that hold us down. But as was the case with Simeon and Anna in the temple that day, the moment when this glory stands before us to be revealed may not be that obvious. It's unlikely to be on a sunlit day in a beautiful church. It's more likely to be in a moment of despair, in the dark, in the midst of trouble and anxiety. And the question is this: at that moment how do we respond? Do we continue to tell ourselves that we just need to retake control, make a small course correction, and that things are bound to pick up? Or do we instead acknowledge that we can't rely on just ourselves, that we have been kidding ourselves all these years, that the human defences and barriers we have built up can be swept away in a second leaving us vulnerable and alone, that the house built on sand is collapsing with a mighty crash, that self-sufficiency is a total illusion? In that moment how do we react to our God who is standing there holding out his hands to us? Do we ignore him, or do we take our burdens and place them in those hands. Has our faith prepared us to recognise the revelation, or do we see nothing?

So, let me ask you a final question: despite the fact we come to church, and profess our faith in God, how many of us are in fact, like Jasmine, unwilling to ask for help, trying to pretend that we're completely in control when we're really not? For us to see as Simeon and Anna saw, requires a reshaping of our lives. A willingness to abandon our illusions of self-sufficiency, and a willingness instead to be prepared to see the revelation of God in the moment of our greatest need and greatest failure. If we try to carry on as normal, the falling tree in the forest will make no sound; we will not recognise our loving God standing before us. But, if through faith, we have prepared our eyes to see and ears to hear, then there will be a sound in the forest; we will see our God with those outstretched arms into which we can, at last, now safely fall.

Amen.