

Luke 2:36-38

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] Let me add my word of welcome to Paul's. It's really great to see you tonight. It's good to have you with us. If I could just get you to flick back one page in the service sheet to the reading, which has in brackets next to it, to be read before the servant.

So that's now. So we're going to read these three verses from Luke chapter 2. And I just want to help us to try and understand what Luke is saying here.

So that's here and God's word. And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin.

And then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

If you keep that open in front of you, that would be really helpful. Looking back over this past year, we have all experienced one major thing, haven't we?

[1 : 19] The potential for life in this world to change really drastically. Can you even remember what life was like this time last year?

If we could have looked into the future, we'd never have pictured it all, would we? There are things that I've said and heard and that we've seen in 2020 that would have baffled us in 2019 if we had future vision.

Things I've said or heard this year in my own home. Darling, have you disinfected the bananas? Do you know, they wouldn't let me in the bank because I wasn't wearing a face mask.

And that was such a beautiful wedding, wasn't it? A Zoom wedding. Of course, many of us have said and heard very, very sad things.

We've seen very sad things that 12 months ago we never imagined, would have imagined that we would. Looking back, I wonder if we've learned not to base our expectations of the future on what we know of the present.

[2 : 32] That the present that we're so familiar with can change, just in a matter of moments. But do you know something this evening?

God's people all through the Bible are counting on that being true. We are counting on a promise that things as they are, are not going to be the same forever.

And we, in this church, have this hope that that really is the case. Now there are lots of people that we've been hearing about, haven't we, this evening, who were involved at the birth of Jesus Christ. And we're going to spend just a few moments looking at one person who features very briefly an elderly lady by the name of Anna. And Anna shows us, she teaches us what it means to expect change in our lives and in this world.

I just want to highlight three things about her this evening. The first thing is how she was looking for change. How she was looking for change. And we see, first of all, that she is very intent on a search for a different and a better future, isn't she?

[3 : 47] She's got an anticipation which is robust that things as they are are not going to stay the same. That one day things are going to be different. And something one day was about to happen that would actually transform life for the better.

And she's part of a group that Luke describes in verse 38 as those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. She, like them, was waiting for a change.

Some kind of release, some kind of freedom. And see how she waits. She's really focused on this change, isn't she? She's not just sort of cruising along in life just hoping for the best.

But she waits expectantly and intently. We're told that she looks for change day and night with prayer and fasting and worship.

And that was really admirable because looking around her, there was no reason at all to expect change. The normal way of life in Jerusalem where she lived was something very, very predictable.

[4 : 54] Jerusalem has known war after war and invasion and occupation and desecration. If you read through the Old Testament, you can see the history of Jerusalem.

Under the Assyrians and occupation under the Babylonians and then the Persians and then the Greeks and then the Roman Caesars. But despite that pattern, century after century, she still thinks, no, things can change.

So easy, isn't it, that if we don't get what we're longing for, before too long, we become pardoned to the longing. We give way to self-pity.

Maybe we look at others and we envy what they have already got that we're still waiting for. But she doesn't do that. Even despite the signs that say, nothing's going to change.

And it's pictured in her own personal life. We're told in verse 36, she was advanced in years and lived as a widow for most of her life until she was 84.

[6 : 05] The original Greek, which Luke wrote this in, it could actually mean that she was a widow for 84, which would make her 107 or thereabouts.

But either way, personally, she is a lady who has felt and endured the pain of longing for change for a very, very long time.

As a widow, more than likely of low means, having no great personal tragedy in her life, has persistently and tenaciously kept looking for something to happen that is going to make things better.

And in a way, her life is a picture of the whole city of Jerusalem as it was at the time. One of widowhood. And what that meant.

Where safety and security and love had long since departed that place. And Jerusalem had known war and death and invasion and slavery and desecration.

[7 : 10] She, Jerusalem, had been downtrodden for so long. And the glory that she once knew as the city of God's blessing has been lost.

And she feels abandoned and rejected. But she does not give up hope. That one day, the sorrows of the widow will be a thing of the past.

And so that's how she was looking for change. But then, secondly, where she was looking for change. Where she was looking for it. Now, of course, we all want things to change for the better, don't we?

None of us want things in this world to stay as they are. But as you look for change in your own life and in the world, do you know where to look for that?

Do you know where real change is going to come from? Well, Anna goes to the place that is the last place on our minds to look for significant change.

[8 : 15] And do you see where she does her waiting in verse 37? For all this time, for all these years, she did not depart from the temple. Worshipping day and night.

Where should we look for this big change that we need? I wonder how you would answer that tonight. We've been really sure over this last year that we've got a few places that we need to look, don't we, to make things better.

A few particular places. We have needed to look to science to help us. Speaking to a parent outside the school gates just a couple of weeks ago, we were kind of moaning about the lockdown and what the rest of it.

And she closed with the remarks, well, science will get us through, won't it? And we have needed to look to science. We've needed to look in the direction of our leaders and our experts and our professors, haven't we?

Or to look to technology to keep us together. We've looked to our own remedies to solve our own ills. And many of those things have been wonderful things to look to and they've been wonderful helps.

[9 : 27] This vaccine is an amazing thing, isn't it? But I reckon most people would never have imagined to look where Anna looks. Where should you look, Anna, for this great change that we need?

She anticipates it in the temple. She counts on change in the place of God with his people in worship and in prayer.

And that is so weird, isn't it? To our ears. I just haven't thought of that, I don't know. Seeing from the outside, that just kind of seems quite dull.

It seems religious and stuffy. It looks less like a vision of the future. And more of a sort of retrograde step into the past.

When she longs for change, Anna goes to church. Where on earth would anyone want to go there?

Well, as far as she's concerned, it is the only place on earth where real change is promised.

[10 : 35] And is going to happen. The place where God is going to do things with his people and for them. Where he is going to meet with his people.

And where he will begin to transform the world as we know it. And so she hopes against hope. And she keeps believing and she keeps looking for change.

Not because she's some hopeless optimist. Or she's just got a kind of visionary personality. But because in the temple she meets with. And hears from a God who makes grand promises.

Where God says, I will change things. Look to me. We've heard some of those promises tonight.

The same promises that Anna would have heard. Like from Isaiah. Of people walking in darkness.

And now one day. Being able to see a great light.

[11 : 36] Perhaps we've given up hope of anything changing really. No wonders to transform the world. No grand and clear answers to the mess of the world that we're in. And we might dream of those things.

But we don't really expect them, do we? But Anna tells us. It's not that those things don't happen and can't happen. But it's about where we're looking. To see those things happening.

It's about where you need to look for the change that you need in your life. Above which horizon God is going to appear. And those two ideas.

At that very hour, she gave thanks to God. The waiting is over. And began to speak of him. That's Jesus. To all who were waiting. The change the world longs for in its mess.

The change that you long for. Anna tells you it's really more about who you're looking for tonight. You're looking for him.

[12 : 39] Why is that? In Luke's Gospel, Luke bookends the life of Jesus with this mention of an hour. It's interesting. There's this hour here at his birth.

Where he appears in the temple. And there is an hour. If you go to the end of the Gospel. That marks his death. In Luke 22. Jesus is arrested by the authorities.

And taken to his crucifixion. And like the Lord that he is. He explains to his killers. And why he is about to die. He says.

When I was with you day after day in the temple. You didn't lay hands on me. But this is your hour. And the power of darkness. Jesus is saying there, isn't he?

I am in control of this death. I am in control of what is about to happen. I'm not the victim of things getting out of control. But I am going to die.

[13 : 41] Because I am about to face the powers of darkness. And darkness and death. Are going to have their hour. With me.

They're going to have their time. So when you rewind the story. It turns out that Anna's hour of redemption here. Comes because of Jesus' hour of rejection.

In Anna's hour. She gives thanks for new life. Because in his hour. He gives himself to the pains of death. Darkness.

And that is why Jesus is the one that you are waiting for. It's not that Jesus is going to make all of your problems go away tonight. It's not, is he? And Anna was still a widow.

When she left the temple. That day. And Jerusalem was still a very troubled place to live in. But what Anna sees is that the redemption given in Jesus goes much, much deeper than what we see around us.

[14 : 46] The change is much bigger and much more significant. And she recognises along with the shepherds and the magi and Mary and Joseph.

And she recognises along with the shepherds and the magi and the magi and the magi and the magi and the magi and the magi. And it's not that you are going to be able to do it. And it's not that you are going to be able to do it. Because he will save me from my sins. And this year has been both awful, hasn't it?

And it's been amazing in places at the same time. Awful things have happened this year. But can I say, we shouldn't make those awful things bigger than they are.

We shouldn't demonise those awful things that are so firmly in our memories. As bad as they have been. As if those things alone are bad enough to explain all the mess that this world is in.

The virus does not explain it all, does it? Because even when it's gone, this world will still be in a mess.

[15 : 57] And next year will have its problems just the same as this year. And yet amazing things have happened too, haven't they? A vaccine. Seeing people loving one another and serving one another.

It has been amazing. But at the same time, those things, as good as they are, we shouldn't idolise those things. As if those things have enough power to get us out of the mess.

In themselves, they do not. The deeper problem of which they are all symptoms is the darkness and the slavery due to our turning away from God who made us.

That's what sin is. And few people admit that that is the real problem in our own lives and in the world. And that's why few people think to look where ammo looks for change.

Change that is big enough to deal with it. But as you look to the place where God comes to meet with humanity in Jesus the man, you find there in him there is nothing that you fear that is in the darkness.

[17 : 13] Nothing that you fear in death and facing God with your shame. There is nothing there that he has not dealt with as he faces his hour.

The hour of darkness. And there is no shame, there is no condemnation from God if you look to him. Only peace.

Perhaps tonight you're aware that like Hannah, like Jerusalem, you're the rest of this supreme love. That maybe you've once enjoyed a love and security.

Maybe it's been for too long. Like the city of Jerusalem, you've long forgotten God's blessings to you. Maybe that's you tonight. Well, learn from Hannah and don't give up hope.

Look for change intently and prayerfully, day and night. And learn where to look. Not at what's around you. Not at your own remedies for your own ills.

[18 : 22] But look to the God who has come to be with his people in Jesus. Like Hannah, come to church. It is the best place to see how God is going to bring change through Jesus.

For you and for the world. And we would be really, really delighted to welcome you here to join with us in hearing more of him. Let me close this evening by saying one more thing to you.

Things can change for you tonight. At this very hour. God has come to you in Jesus.

He has come to bring the change that you most need. To be right with him. To know him forever.

And so please tonight, don't base your expectations of the future on what you know now.

Things can change. And only with Jesus. Only with him. You can count on that. Don't let this hour pass you by.

[19 : 32] Don't let him pass you by. Because it's not what you're looking for tonight that matters, is it? It is who you're looking for. And so I'm going to lead us in a prayer now.

And I'll invite you to pray this quietly in your hearts with me. As a response. Let's pray. Let's pray.