

SERMON

Rev Tiffer Robinson

20 years ago, in the year 2000 there was an exhibition at the National Gallery called "Seeing Salvation". I suspect I went on a school trip, as it wasn't really my scene. I will have seen Dali's crucifixion, Holman Hunt's Light of the world, but I can't remember them. The name of the exhibition was what stuck in my mind: "seeing salvation".

The words we've just heard from the gospel of Luke, of Simeon finally seeing his promised Messiah, are some of the most famous in the New Testament, used as they are at Evensong and funerals, "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation". The words of a man who had longed for this day for many years, to know that God was now, at the right time, bringing about his kingdom, and the consolation of Israel. What form that would take had perhaps not been clear to him, but this day, with this child, he knew.

I wonder if you can remember when you realised who this child is? Perhaps you are still searching, and waiting. Perhaps you feel like you have always known. Of course, unlike Simeon, and Anna, and those who knew Jesus for that small window in history, we are not able to see salvation in the same sense. After his resurrection, in the upper room having allayed Thomas's doubts, Jesus said "You believe because you have seen me, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." With these words, Jesus was talking to all of us, we who believe without having seen the Messiah in the flesh.

But how do we see, or sense salvation in our world? Is our faith really just a clinging to thin air?

It was a couple of years before I went to the National Gallery that I had a vision of Christ, not with my eyes, but whilst asleep. Brought up in a non churchgoing family, and at that stage convinced that faith was a delusion for other people, I dreamt that I was mocking people of faith. They welcomed me to join in their strange ritual, and I was handed a piece of broken glass in which I saw the face of Jesus. This started me on a journey of discovery that resulted in accepting salvation three years later, after much bible study and personal wrestling, because try as I might, I couldn't forget what I'd seen.

Where do you see salvation? Perhaps you see it in paintings or feel it in sculpture? Perhaps you hear it in music or experience it in nature, or see God working through the people around you?

When we worship together we can hear salvation in the words of scripture, see salvation upon the altar, feel salvation in our hands, taste it in our mouths. One of the hardest things for many people over the last year has been long periods of not receiving the sacrament, and some are still waiting. Perhaps we hear of Simeon's taking the infant in his arms with that same longing, as we long to receive, or sing together, or just stand close to one another.

A light to lighten the gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel. Around 40 days ago, in most Christmas services John 1 would have been read out, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it," and as we come to the end of this season, here is that light, the light of the world. So fragile, and yet with the power to destroy death. Did Simeon know how this child would bring salvation to the world? Did he know about the suffering, the cruel death that awaited him, when he said to Mary, "and a sword shall pierce your own soul too?"

But this story isn't just about Simeon. Anna has fewer column inches, but is no less important. She hasn't left the Temple, we are told for many years, and was a great age. After Simeon has given Mary and Joseph the prophecy concerning their son, she appears, and praises God and begins telling everyone she can find about this child. Where Simeon has received assurance from God that this is the messiah, it is Anna who takes the role of the first evangelist, preaching to all the people of God that the messiah has come to redeem the world. Having seen salvation with her own eyes, she hands this salvation on to others, and that is our role too. To hand on what we have seen to a longing world.