

Hearts prepared to receive Jesus

"Are you ready for Christmas?" A question that is asked countless times as we get nearer to December 25th. No one likes being unprepared for things but the worrying thing nowadays is someone asked me the question first this year at the beginning of September and for someone who doesn't even think about getting ready until 1st December it was quite disturbing. But over the last couple of weeks there has been an ever quickening pace to preparations as people rush around making sure that they are ready. No one wants to be told that they're too late to get a Christmas turkey because they're all sold!

Whenever our lives get busy it's important that our hearts don't become overwhelmed. We need to be watchful that our celebration of Jesus does not distract us from our relationship with Jesus.

In the opening chapters of Luke we meet some individuals whose hearts were prepared to "receive their King". Among them were Mary, Simeon, Anna and the shepherds.

They may have lived at a different time to us in different circumstances but the things that we see in their hearts can also be in ours today.

When the start of the book of Luke was written there was no Christmas season, "Joy to the world" and "Silent Night" had not been written. Indeed the believers in God at the time could have been forgiven for thinking their Number 1 carol was "How long, O Lord, how long?"

We are introduced to Mary in the first chapter. She lived in a very dark period in Israel's history. Nearly 400 years had passed since the words of Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament) had been written and they were still waiting for the promised Messiah. They are under oppression from the Roman Empire and life looks very grim.

Little do they know that God in His infinite mercy and grace is about to bestow on Mary and through her the world the greatest blessing ever given to man!

Mary's day would have started pretty ordinarily. She had no idea that the angel Gabriel was about to visit her or why or that this was indeed God's appointed time for the promise of the Messiah to be fulfilled and perhaps most dramatically for Mary, that she a young, almost certainly teenage virgin, was to be God's chosen vessel to carry the life of our Saviour within her.

Mary's story is of a heart prepared for God's visitation. When Mary first heard the words that Gabriel spoke she was, not unnaturally perplexed, and responded with her mind. The message didn't make sense and so she asked, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" a perfectly natural response in human terms. But when Gabriel went on to give her more details Mary's next response was from her heart. She knew this was not a time to reason, but a time to believe.

A paraphrase of her response might be, "I hear and receive your words, for I know they are God's words. I will keep them and cherish them in my heart. I am His servant-vessel and welcome Him to do in me all that He has promised."

What an amazing response from a young, engaged, teenage girl who had just heard that she was about to become pregnant through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit.

She could have resisted or argued, offered another option or try to come up with a better plan.

She could have asked for a few weeks to think it over. She could have said, "This isn't the best time for me. I love what you say and really want to be the one chosen for this amazing privilege, but couldn't it happen after I'm married so I won't have the reproach of carrying a child without a husband?" She didn't do any of these.

Mary's heart was ready to trust and ready to receive. It was a listening heart, a yielded heart, and a welcoming heart. It was a heart that heard God's promise and a heart of faith that was reassured by the words. "With God nothing is impossible."

God is a very practical God and wanted to give Joseph and Mary in particular but also the Jewish people and us further confirmation, if it was needed that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

In eight short verses in Luke we learn about a man called Simeon. That is all we're told that he was a man. Simeon's relationship with God meant everything to him. He took his commitment to God seriously and that commitment shaped his character. The Scripture tells us he was a just and devout man. He lived to do the right thing before God and others. As a neighbour he would be a man of integrity.

He paid attention to the Scriptures and knew the promise of the prophets concerning the promised Messiah and his eyes of faith were looking for His coming. In Luke 2:25 we are told "The Holy Spirit was upon him"

Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he wouldn't die and go to heaven until he had seen the Messiah alive upon the earth. One day as he was getting ready he sensed a leading in his heart to go to the Temple. A heart that is led by the Holy Spirit is a heart that is led with peace.

He was at the Temple just before Joseph and Mary arrived to dedicate Jesus and bring an offering according to the Law. "What timing!" you might say but it wasn't fate that brought about this meeting it was the Holy Spirit.

Simeon approached the child with outstretched arms. He was about to hold God's salvation for the world! Simeon was overjoyed. His eyes looked on the tender life of God in human flesh; His heart embraced the presence of the Prince of Peace; His soul rejoiced in the fulfilment of God's promise. His words declared and affirmed the Gospel of the Redeemer- the One who would be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people, Israel. Simeon was now ready to depart in peace and go to his heavenly home.

Similarly to Simeon, Anna is only found in a few short verses of Luke but her testimony is immensely powerful. She was a prophetess of the tribe of Asher. We are told that she was a very old woman at the time of Jesus' birth. She had been widowed at a young age after only seven years of marriage and had dedicated her life to serving God and to prayer.

While at the Temple one morning after a night dedicated to worship, fasting and prayer Anna came upon Joseph and Mary as they entered the Temple with their newborn Son. She must have prayed hundreds if not thousands of times concerning the coming of the promised Messiah and when she saw Jesus she was infused with excitement and gratitude. She knew that the promise of

the Word of God that she held in her heart concerning the coming Messiah had been fulfilled in front of her eyes.

Mary, Simeon and Anna are all witnesses to those that believe that God keeps His promises. His greatest fulfilled promise is of course that He sent his one and only Son, Jesus, to earth in human form, to restore our relationship with God by His sacrificial death on the cross and His resurrection to sit at God's right hand and intercede for us. The richest people are those who live their lives carrying the treasure of God's promises in their hearts.

Anna prayed and God heard her prayer and answered it. He wants to hear our prayers and Scripture promises that He will not only hear them but will answer them in his time and in His way in order to bless us.

And what of the shepherds you may be saying. Well their amazing story is found in Luke 2: 8-20 and I will be looking at that on Christmas morning at 10.00 am here when we will be having a short service of celebrating Christ's birth. If you are able to join us that will be brilliant; if not then both of today's sermons and the Christmas Day sermon will be on our website shortly.

This Christmas as we remember Jesus' birth our hearts can welcome the reality of His presence. As we experience one of the busiest times of the year and take time out now to remember his birth, we can be assured that His peace will fill our hearts, His praise will be upon our lips and that His joy will flood our souls. May our faith respond to His presence and His promises and may our heart response to Him always be, " Let Your will be done in me according to all You have spoken."

AMEN.