

Life in the Spirit 4 – Moved by the Spirit (Luke 2:22-32)

If I was to say the names Gladys Burrell, Teiichi Igarashi, William Ivy Baldwin or John Glenn, would any of those names mean anything to you? (Maybe some of you have heard of John Glenn) – well, they're all world record holders – particularly special because of their age. Gladys Burrell is the oldest woman to run a marathon aged 92, Teiichi Igarashi climbed Mount Fuji in Japan aged 100, William Ivy Baldwin tightrope walked across a canyon aged 82 and John Glenn is the oldest man in space aged 77 (also first American to orbit earth – but it's the other bit I'm interested in).

One of the great changes in our modern society is that we have become a society for the young. Our heroes tend to be young – whether sports stars or actors or that grim catch-all term 'celebrities', many of whom are famous for being famous. To quote the title of the Oscar-winning film from a few years ago, this is 'no country for old men'.

And yet, one can't help feeling that we've lost so much by this obsession with youth. It's not a perspective the bible shares. Yes, there are young heroes – but there are also old ones, and in this passage today we meet two of them – Simeon and Anna.

And before I get onto our main theme for today I want to reflect briefly on one very important message from this story – **you're never too old, everyone matters to God.** Indeed perhaps some of the most significant moments in your life can come right near the end of them. Simeon and Anna were both very old but we know nothing about them apart from what read in this passage. They had decades of strong and mature faith behind them but what they did, who they knew, where they lived is all unknown to us. And yet, on one day, *God used them both to do something so important it finds its way into heart of the bible story.* Their names now live on for all time.

You're never too old to be used by God. And what we see here is that what God used in these amazing older saints are the accumulated wisdom of a life lived with God. They're not asked to be action men or women, they simply listen to God, go to the one place they always go to and (as it happens) where He tells them to be that day, and talk to the people he tells them to talk to. God uses their faith, their prayer life, their intimacy with God to do something wonderful. He doesn't need young bodies or great energy – he uses what they *can* offer, not what they can't.

I couldn't teach from this passage without sharing that today. As anyone who comes here regularly knows, we're on an exciting journey here as a church. And it comes across, for the most part, as an active journey. We're reaching out, we're doing more, we have many opportunities now and in the years ahead.

But I don't ever want to give the impression that all this can only be achieved by the young and active. **Everyone has a part to play.** We need people who can hold us in prayer, people who have the wisdom of life experience, people of any age who are close to God and can listen to him. I don't ever want to hear anyone say: 'I'm too old, I'm no use any more, I can't be a part of this, I've got nothing to offer.' Just like Simeon and Anna, everyone matters to God and everyone can play a part. We need people who can pray, we need people who can listen to God and share God's wisdom and perspective, we need people who've been there and done it and bought the T-shirt to share their experience. In short we need our older saints every bit as much as we need our young guns. *What you offer may be different – but that's the point. That's what it means to be a body.* God didn't have use young people to do what Simeon and Anna did because they mostly we don't have the depth of faith that Simeon and Anna have, the life lived spent close to God.

I look around and I can see Simeons and Annas – and I want to say – *we need you, God needs you,* we and He need that life experience, that prayerfulness, that depth of faith. You all matter to God and you *all* have a part to play. Fast moving rivers are shallow, slow moving rivers are deep.

Onto our main theme – the phrase I picked out from the story to give us our title for today is in v27 **‘Moved by the Spirit....’**. What does that mean? In Simeon’s case he heard very clearly from God that he needed to go to a particular place to do a particular thing on a particular day. So really what I want to address today is this: is this something all of us can aspire to? Can God prompt us like that? Does Spirit still speak to us today like it did to Simeon?

Well the simple answer to that question is **YES!** And the reason I can say that with confidence is in v25, that little phrase ‘the Holy Spirit was on him’. Before Pentecost that was a relatively rare phenomenon: the Spirit has always been there – it was there at creation, it comes on numerous people in the OT, but usually leaders or prophets at certain times. So at the time, Simeon was another example of that. But, Jesus promises before he dies that the Holy Spirit is going to come in a *new* way, to live in the hearts of *all* believers – which of course comes true at Pentecost. From that point on the Holy Spirit is ‘on’ all believers – in other words dwelling in them and slowly transforming them into the people God has called us to be. In other words we can all be Simeons.

But it’s not that simple is it? Many of us may never have felt God clearly speaking to us, or revealing things to us. So what else needs to happen?

There is a mystery to these things, but in my own experience as well my own Christian reflection, to live like Simeon needs some other key things to develop in us:

Firstly there **a question of belief** – we do need to accept at a deep level that *God is the kind of God who speaks today*. This isn’t controversial in most of the world which naturally accepts the reality of the spiritual world, but here in the West, especially since the late 19th century we’ve been affected (you might say *infected*) by an anti-supernatural agenda. Lots of clever people, including lots of clever Christians, have told us that miracles can’t happen any more. God doesn’t show up any more – not *really* – all we need to is to try and live by his commands.

That’s all very well: but it’s not enough, is it? At least it wasn’t enough for me. Do we really want to put God in a box like that? The whole point of Christmas is that God shows up in our world. Pentecost spreads that around the world – has God changed? Is every modern-day miracle story a fake? **NO!** We need to believe that God can still show up in a real and tangible sense today.

Then there’s **a question of surrender** – God tends to be much more real when we really give our hearts to him. If we’re only half-hearted, if we’re always holding some of ourselves back, then we can’t really expect to get close enough to him to live in the reality of the spiritual world. God is gracious, but most of all he wants hearts that are fully yielded to him.

Finally, **God never contradicts what he has already said in his Word, the bible**. So it follows that we need to invest in knowing Word of God. Put simply, the more we know God’s *general* word to all people, the more we’ll be able to hear his *specific* word to us.

So if you want to grow in this more direct and intimate relationship with God, the first questions we need to ask ourselves are:

- Am I willing to believe that this stuff really happens, even to normal people today?

- Do I really want God to be at the centre of my life? There's no other way really, but the best way to live is keep giving ourselves to God every day. Am I doing that?
- Am I growing in my understanding of him? Not all of us can memorise bible quotes and all that, but we can read our bibles every day and do our best to understand it and live it as best we can.

So it's not rocket science, or really even a series of techniques. I formed the view very young that this stuff was real, but I didn't know how to hear from God, for some years I sort of tried all kinds of things and it didn't work. I also had a bad experience as a teenager of seeing someone I loved have a kind of spiritual breakdown and thought to myself 'well if that's what being open to the Spirit looks like, I don't want any of *that*, thank you very much'.

The thing is, I was looking at it all wrong. My motives were right, but it was all about trying harder, about some sort of magic technique. But ask yourself the question: why do you love someone? Why do I love Alise? Is it because she tried really hard to make me like her, or had all kinds of techniques to win my affection? No, she was just herself. I loved her for who she was (and is).

It's like that with God. What we fall in love with is *who God is*, and as we dwell more and more in that intimate relationship we start to intuitively know what His heart is. And then sometimes God reveals bits and pieces of things we can't know but he wants us to hear. **It's about being close to God** – try and stay as close to God as possible and the rest will start to come.

For me it was during a particular crisis one evening in 1998 that I think I first heard God directly. I was ministering in a dangerous and difficult situation and was completely out of my depth and God spoke something very simple to me, just one phrase which led me to the right path and to safety. It will be different for different people, but it was absolutely real and I realised that this kind of deep relationship could be cultivated.

But the point is, the Spirit points us to Jesus – that's all the Spirit does. So God reveals things that lead us to Jesus or to more of his heart. I trained myself in a slightly unusual way – I had to catch a commuter train every evening – EXPAND, make point that this is *not* meant to be how we live, it was just training for what really matters which is to hear God in ways that grow the kingdom.

Very briefly as I close, I want us to go back to the story and note two different ways Simeon was moved by the Spirit:

- **Moved by Spirit in vision** – READ v26. This was a long term revelation, a very significant word about the future of the kingdom of God, and no doubt it had fired Simeon's spiritual life for many years. But then there was a second dimension.... – READ v27
- **Moved by Spirit in action** – decades of preparation and vision, but on this day of all days he was also prompted to do a specific thing. As I mentioned in a sermon a few months ago, the 10-second rule is really important here – EXPAND

One last story: MONKSTON EXAMPLE – in July 2016.... **Can we be moved by the Spirit today?** **YES!** The question is, do we want to be? How close to God do we want to get? Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock.... how much more.... Holy Spirit to those who ask him!