

## THE WAITING GAME

**PREACHER : The Ven Simon Burton-Jones, Archdeacon**

Sunday, January 31<sup>st</sup> 2010  
**Presentation of Christ in the Temple**

10.30am  
Rochester Cathedral

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Among the virtues which are said to define Britishness – like fair play and hearing people out – is the willingness to queue. There are several unwritten rules over queuing up: that if you arrive at the counter the same time as someone else that you should offer them first place and that to jump a queue is second only to first strike nuclear warfare in a British list of unbecoming conduct. Yet scratch beneath the surface and a different mood emerges. If there are several check-outs, customers spend the time queuing working out whether the other queues are moving more quickly – which some unnamed universal law proves they always are. And you can feel the disapproval behind you if you take a nanosecond longer to pull out the right change at the counter or through no fault of your own the credit card won't swipe properly.

As life speeds up, so do our expectations of it. We have grown accustomed to services being delivered when we want them and how we want them. Our choices have become more sophisticated and yet somehow more trivial. National history is replete with generations which longed for a better future: from the abolition of dangerous working conditions to the arrival of universal suffrage; from the provision of a decent wage to the creation of a safer Europe. There is little of significance we long to achieve together now, save that of winning the World Cup. This is challenging for Christians because our faith is supposed to be imbued with a sense of mission and purpose. If the surrounding culture has become bored and distracted, how can we resist a similar fate?

Today we recall the presentation of a young Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem. There he encountered a man, Simeon, whose sole remaining purpose in life was to see the Messiah with his own eyes before he died. Simeon had longed for this moment, investing his wait with deep spiritual passion. When the day dawned, he was ready to die.

Simeon's story helps us to think through what it means to be patient. Although he had become an old man, Simeon had a clarity of purpose and hope that was unusually striking. He knew what he was looking for and would not be distracted from the task. By contrast, the spiritual drift in the lives of affluent Christians across Britain is a dangerous source of weakness. We do not pray much and we do not read the Bible often; we feel little sadness for the millions who do not know Christ personally and little active desire to do something about this. We are called to much greater preparedness than currently on display.

Simeon's intensity was the more remarkable for being sustained. The Christian life is often said to be like a journey. Usually this is taken to mean that there are always new experiences to be had. I think there is another dimension to it. Long journeys are often slow and frustrating, punctuated by periods of rapid progress. You know what I mean: you get up at 3am to be in time at the airport. You actually arrive in plenty of time, check in and grab breakfast. When the plane finally reaches the runway you've been up six hours but travelled only sixty miles to the airport. Yet in the next six hours you will travel over two and a half thousand miles. The life of faith is strikingly similar. People can feel that nothing is happening

in their life with God and then suddenly they are whisked off their feet. I do not know why this happened but the Christian journey is less like the measured pace of the rambler's association and more like the dreaded Heathrow experience!

When you are first waiting to be called for boarding at an airport, you are keen for things to move on. After the inevitable delays you start to lose your eagerness and begin to wander aimlessly round. This is how, having arrived with ages to spare you still end up dashing from the counter of an overpriced perfume shop to make the flight. Having waited so long for just one event, Simeon could easily have missed it by taking a day off from the Temple to wander the cosmopolitan markets of Jerusalem. But he kept his mind on the hope God had offered him. We need to be ready when God calls us because the gate can – and does – shut for the unprepared.

The other remarkable thing about Simeon was his readiness for death. Being ready to die in a cause is considered the occupation of evil fanatics today. If so, then we should reclaim it for the cause of peace. Simeon had one goal left in life: to meet the Messiah. He wasn't tearing round trying to make the most of his latter days, ticking off that Sunday supplement list of fifty things to do before you die. He had *one* thing left to do before he died and it didn't unsettle him that this could happen at any moment. Culturally we are a long way from Simeon's contentment as we fill our lives with goods and experiences in a doomed effort to add meaning and security to our lives. To be prepared for death is one aspect of a distinctive Christian life. It would be naïve to describe this as an untroubled process but many have proved it can be woven creatively into their own story.

Christian waiting is alert and sustained. If you've visited the optician you'll be familiar with the way they fit a frame over you and then slot different lenses into place until they find the right one for you. It's a simple procedure to comply with because what has been fuzzy suddenly becomes crystal clear. So many Christians, so many churches, sit in the optician's chair so to speak, looking at the blur in front of them and say 'yeah, right, whatever' and then get up and leave. If we want to capture a vision of God moving meaningfully among us we need to wait patiently in that optician's chair until, like Simeon, we can honestly say: 'my eyes have seen your salvation'.