

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Chaplain, the Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley, preached this sermon at the Lambeth Palace service celebrating the 25th anniversary of women's ordination to the priesthood in the Church of England.



May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

There are few images in Scripture that show a scene of such intimacy, and such public exposure at the same time. Public exposure, of course, because they were in the temple courts, with people milling about, some paying attention, some not.

In the temple courts with two prophets who were known for their faithfulness and life of prayer, and maybe known for being a little strange as well.

And yet, an intimate scene. Simeon and Anna gathered around the little family, admiring a newborn, sharing thoughts and wisdom. In many ways, a perfect picture for Christian life, and ministry, poised between the seen and the unseen, the public and the private, between earth and heaven.

A picture of strange togetherness, too. Simeon and Anna, in their eighties, having had a life of waiting; a young couple surprised by calling and vocation, and a baby, yet to become, another life within which to recognise and nurture the presence of God. All different, and all needed.

Simeon the faithful, who prayed and prayed, and generously hands down ministry to the next generation, with his blessing, advice and health warning.

Anna the trail blazer, who rushes out and spreads the Good News, as soon as her long wait is over, setting an example of joyful response and engagement.

We give thanks for Simeons and Annas over the years, for those who have prayed and waited, supported and come alongside, opened up new ways and set examples.

Many are here today. We give thanks that ministry comes in all shapes and sizes, just like people, and in our difference, we make up the people of God. In our differences, we respond to God's call and reach out to the world around us.

Mary and Joseph, in contrast, are only setting out on their vocation journey, tentatively and obediently. They follow the patterns set by generations before them for responding to God: coming into the temple, offering their child to God.

I often wonder what they thought of Simeon and Anna. I supposed they had had plenty of strange encounters already, from shepherds to wise men from afar.

Anna doesn't seem overly interested in them, only in the gift of God they are carrying. Simeon has words for them as persons, but the words are hardly reassuring. He blesses them first.

No prophecy, no hard words, expresses before first and foremost, an assurance of the love and presence of God in their life. Then, words of prophecy, maybe guidance, imparting a little understanding of the extraordinary gift they have been entrusted with.

And finally, a warning – 'a sword will pierce your own soul also'. If there ever was a time to turn back, now would be the perfect time. Run away from the risk, run away from the crushing responsibility to nurture this child into the person Simeon predicts he will become.

But there is no running away, of course. The gift has been given.

A gift full of potential, a gift that stirs, and demands attention, and cannot be ignored. A gift at once blindingly obvious to those who pay attention, and a gift hidden and sometimes ignored, even denied.

Let us cherish and nurture this gift of God in one another's lives, in our shared ministry, in our shared prayers, in our shared journeys. Let us cherish this gift where it is public and obvious, and where it is hidden, private and yet equally powerful.

Together, may we witness to the gift that lives in us, and the God who has called us to follow him. Amen.

[Read more about the female priests 25th anniversary service at Lambeth Palace](#)

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