

LUKE 2:22-35
THE EYES OF FAITH...?

Highlights and hopes

This is the time of year when look back – newspapers and television give us their reviews of the year, the highlights and the lowlights. We asked some members of the church to choose a highlight of 2017 and a hope for 2018; here are their contributions:

Andrew Watson's highlight was David's engagement; his hope that the building work is finished.

Sandra Paulin's highlight was her grandson on BBC Alba; her hope is a baby for her daughter. Alison Robertson's highlight was her sister-in-law's pregnancy after 2 rounds of IVF; her hope that the church is more involved in the community.

Michael Merriman's highlight - cooking Christmas dinner for 5; his hope that the world sees more of what it shares in common than what divides us.

Claire Fraser's highlight was completing her training as a special constable and her hope revolves round getting married in March.

Psalms 90 talks about God as our dwelling-place; He has been for generations and will be always, the One in whom we find our home, our belonging, our safety and security. Give thanks to God for these and your own highlights of 2017 and make these hopes and your personal hopes for 2018 into prayers. There is a card with 2018 on it; take it home and write your own hopes on it; keep it safe; turn these hopes into prayers for God to be at work.

God's Time Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

We're going to draw a clock; each part is also symbolic of time and our lives.

First we need a *Circle*: this stands for the world and all of us in it; we share the world, and time together; we all have the same opportunity to share together and know the love that God has for us and to do what God calls us to do.

Next we add the *Numbers and the hour hand*: these are the large blocks, the big jobs, the things that take up lots of our time: work with lots of hours in the day; time at home; time at school; where will you spend large amounts of your time this year? How will that change? Will there be a new job, a new home life, a new school? How can we share God's love in these big places?

Then we add the *Minute marks and the minute hand*: these are the small parts of our days, the quiet moments, the short conversations we have with people, the short journeys we make together. God wants us to make most of these small parts of our days too; how can we make use of these small bits of our lives to build God's kingdom?

Finally, we add "God's time":

- We are challenged to do things at God's pace, at the times of His choosing; we are challenged to learn to sense God's time and when that time is right.
- God is with us always in all the big things and in the small times; God goes with us everywhere and at all times, even if doesn't always seem that way, we can learn to be aware of God's presence with us.
- God is helping us to be the right kind of people in all our times.

God at work in all these things. Ecclesiastes 3 shows us all sorts of things that are part of life, 28 different activities that go to make up life as we live it; some of these are good, some are bad; some make life easy, some make life hard. "A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" an unfolding pattern in which God is at work in us and in the

world; a rhythm to life that comes from God; God is with us in all of these different times of our lives. God is at work in us in all of these things, at work in us when we laugh and when we weep, when we dance and when we mourn, when we speak and when we are silent.

Trust God in everything. Let us use our time to build His kingdom in every part of our lives. Let us pray that God will be at work in every part of our life and in every part of the world in 2018.

Luke 2:22-35 The eyes of faith...?

For a minute, put yourself into Simeon's shoes. We think he is an old man; he has a deep faith, he is described as "*righteous and devout*" (Luke 2:25) You are walking into the temple building as you have done every day for a long time; God has promised you something special, but it hasn't happened yet; "perhaps today!" You come into the temple, a large open building, a church without seats, with people milling about and it is a bit noisy; you look about you to see what you can see; is there anything different today? Amidst all the hustle and bustle of the usual crowds, your eye lands on a young family, a husband and wife and their young baby, walking in to the temple, but not very sure where they're going; they are anonymous, quiet. For some reason, your gaze stays with them; something inside you tells you there is more to this couple than you first think; the Spirit says "go and see!" So you go to see!

You look into the buggy and you see the little baby. His parents are bringing their little boy to dedicate him to God, to bring him to God with the sacrifice; "he belongs to God!" You ask if you can take the child in your arms and, perhaps slightly bemused, the parents agree. The Spirit of God at work in you tells you that this is the special moment; this is the day you have been waiting for; this is the day that the promise comes true; this child you're holding in your arms is God's special moment, God's time for Israel. Simeon praises God quietly with his song *Nunc Dimittis*: "*Sovereign Lord...*" (Luke 2:29ff) What Simeon has been waiting for, is now right here in front of him, in his arms; God is at work and here is salvation for Israel and light for the world. It won't always be easy: "*this child...*" (Luke 2:34) but God is at work.

Someone has suggested that it was people like Simeon who saved the faith in Israel, devout men and women who believed quietly but faithfully, keeping the light of faith alive. The Pharisees had externalized religion, and had turned it into just outward observance; the scribes professionalised religion, becoming dry ecclesiastics in whom the fire had gone out; the Sadducees had secularized religion, making it a sceptical and worldly thing; the zealots had nationalized religion, and it had become a political thing. People like Simeon, humble, devout, if obscure people prayed and kept their hearts pure and were a thousand miles ahead of the others and kept the faith alive in Israel. I find this fascinating, because that's exactly how the faith will stay alive in Scotland in the twenty-first century; it will stay alive, not by church dictats, not by plans and programmes, not by making sure all the l's are dotted, and the t's are crossed, but by people who pray, devout people who live for Jesus, humble, faithful, even if obscure people like you and me.

What do eyes of faith see? To some eyes, all that happened in the temple that day was another young couple dedicating their child, the same as any other day. To Simeon, to the eyes of faith, inspired by the Spirit, he saw God at work and the Saviour of the world. What do the eyes of our faith see? Do we see God at work in our Church to provide for us, to provide money to support our new worker, or to do the work on our building, or provide and inspire people to take on jobs in the congregation? Do we see that? The richer we are, the harder that is to see! Or what do we see? Do we see God at work in young people at school through the ministry of Scripture Union in Edinburgh, a group of 16 children meeting at 8am on a Wednesday morning to be the SU group in our primary school? Or what do we see? Do we see God at work drawing new people to be part of Messy Church or the Guild of Friendship or the Church Wednesday group so that they can do something to engage with faith? Or what do we see? Do the eyes of faith see God at work in the world? Or do we think He has gone

away and left us? With the eyes of faith, Simeon saw God at work in the world and he was overjoyed!

What do you hope and pray that God will do in 2018? Write down your prayers and hopes for 2018 on the card; keep it in your bible or on the pin-board in your kitchen or somewhere else; pray these prayers and these hopes as year goes past; what will the eyes of your faith see happen in response to your hopes and prayers?

Many of us have worked long and hard in the service of the Lord Jesus; we are tired and weary in that service; these last few years have been hard, perhaps; we're feeling as if we're left carrying a load. We're not sure what the future holds and how we can carry on. So two more things for the eyes of faith to see: first of all, God is still working His purpose out in us, in His church, and in the world; We don't always see what that is; we see a tangled web of threads, but not the picture that God is making; nevertheless, God is still at work in the world; let the eyes of faith see that. Secondly, Jesus is still the Saviour of the world, the rock of our salvation; He is still someone worthy of our trust, still the light of the world; in that, we walk in Simeon's shoes – he saw Jesus and rejoiced, the light of the world has come. Learn to trust God, to pray, to keep the eyes of faith open, and rejoice in what God has done and what God will yet do!