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I have always been curious and inquisitive about social rituals, their origins and practices, and how these are carried across cultures. Perhaps because I have lived in 7 very different national cultures and spent time visiting several others, I am fascinated by the social rituals for closing one year and welcoming in the next.

I have come across four cultures, the Chinese, Islamic, Persian and Hebrew, each with elaborate year-ending, closing rituals, and year-beginning, opening ceremonies.

The Chinese, for example, celebrate New Year over 16 days. It starts seven days before New Year's Eve, with a thorough cleaning of the house, putting away old things, discard the unwanted, and prepare to welcome the New Year without baggage from the past. A week later, on New Year's eve, people gather for *reunion* dinners, which starts with repentance for hurts caused by words and deeds, before everyone sits down for a 10-course meal.

In Hebrew culture, New Year celebrations last around 12 days, beginning with ten Days of Repentance. The lighting of candles, blowing the shofar (ram's horn), eating fresh seasonal fruit and honey, washing of hands before touching bread and several other rituals, are mostly symbolic, a reminder of something from the past for which the community is grateful.

One particularly powerful symbolic act is conducted in the afternoon of New Year's eve. People gather beside a body of fresh water (the sea, a river or a pond containing fish), to prayerfully ask God's forgiveness as they "*cast away (their) sins into the depths of the sea*".

The pre- new year rituals in these four cultures stand in stark contrast to our own. We simply transition from one year to another, singing *Auld Lang Syne* and wish each other Happy New Year. One year switches off, another switches on.

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What I have just said is a **personal** observation; it is not backed by detailed sociological or ethnographic study.

I share my observation with you because the birth of Jesus was such a pivotal moment in human history, a time to close out the past and prepare for the future. During his life, Jesus did just that. He taught, preached and healed everywhere He went, corrected abuses of the law, corrected wrong attitudes and relationships, and showed the way to God's planned glorious future for us.

Jesus' birth heralded the time for God's final act, to use a theatre metaphor. After a 400 year "interval" of God's silence, between His last message through Malachi, to Gabriel's visit to Zechariah in the Temple, the time had come for God to clothe Himself in human flesh and present Himself to His people as an infant. God had a detailed plan, ready to go. The 400-year "Interval" (God's silence) resulted in many gave up waiting for God's promise of a Saviour - He has not come yet, therefore it is unlikely he will be coming anytime soon. But a group of faithful followers in every generation through the 400 years, continued to believe, God would be true to His Word - the Messiah **would definitely come!** Their's was a mood of expectancy, which explains why no one in the Christmas story, ever questioned the arrival of "The Messiah". As soon as the Herald Angel, Gabriel mentioned "The Messiah", "The Saviour", "One who would save the people from their sins", Mary, Joseph and the shepherds knew exactly what he was talking about.

The ground work had been laid. An elderly couple who prayed their entire lives for the gift of a child from God, were about to have their prayer answered. This very special child was destined to play a special role, preparing the way for Jesus' life and ministry, then revealing Him to the world at the appropriate time.

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At the engagement ceremony of a young couple, the groom would have recited to his bride, *Behold, thou art betrothed unto me, with this ring, in accordance with the Law of Moses and Israel (we agree to an exclusive relationship before God and society)*. He struggled to believe what he had said, struggled to believe he could have an exclusive relationship with his bride, not realising, God was preparing both of them for greater trials to come! Will they trust God through it all?

We think the Christmas story ends with a band of dirty smelly shepherds who lived and worked on the fringes of society, never privy to important news, yet they were one of two groups of people¹, entrusted with the news that prophecy was being fulfilled before their very own eyes!

Our text today is a short but very important Scene in God's Final Act. It lasts but several minutes in real time, but it is very important.

This God-fearing couple, Jesus' parents, have come through a **very** difficult and testing time, but their faith in God and in His laws is not shaken. As required by the Law, Jesus was circumcised and named on the 8th day.

On completing 40 days since His birth, Jesus' parents take Him once again to the Temple, this time to be dedicated to God. This *dedication* was very important.

You see, a Hebrew woman's first born, if it were a son, was presumed to be predestined to be a priest to serve in the Temple. The parents had a choice: they could **redeem** their first-born son, buy him back from the priesthood, by paying the priest, 5 silver Shekels.

At His dedication in the Temple, Jesus' parents did not seek to "redeem" Him; instead Jesus was committed to the priesthood, to fulfil the prophesy that He would be the High Priest, forever², interceding for us before God.

¹ The other being the wise men from the orient

² Hebrews 7:26–8:5

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God's plan is perfect. He does not control us to make sure we act according to His plan; He trusts those have placed their faith in Him, that they will exercise their free will to accomplish God's plan.

On the day Mary and Joseph brought 40-day old Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated, as they walked into the Temple courtyard, their paths cross with Simeon's. His name means, "**hearing**." Simeon isn't introduced as a priest or prophet. He is an ordinary person who lives in the city. We are told four things about him. He is:

- 1 Righteous.** He is an upright, God-fearing man who is serious about following God and obeying Him.
- 2 Devout.** Simeon has an attitude of reverence towards God and is consistent in practicing his faith.
- 3 Expectant.** He lives in a spirit of *expectancy*, looking forward to the time when Israel will be "*comforted*" by the Messiah's salvation, set free from all oppression.
- 4 Spirit-filled.** To be "filled" with Holy Spirit is rare in the Old Testament; we are blessed in our day, as God has released the Holy Spirit, to "*live with them*"³ and guide and protect them.

It is clear that Simeon has a special conversational relationship with God. In the warmth of this relationship, "*It had been **revealed to him by the Holy Spirit** that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*"⁴

One day as Simeon is praying about the coming Messiah, God tells him, "*Hang in there, Simeon; your eyes **WILL see** the Messiah on earth, before I call you back to myself,* and Simeon took God at His word, and waited, and he continued to worship God as fervently as before, knowing God would be true to His Word.

³ Romans 8:9

⁴ Luke 2:26

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So, when the Holy Spirit prompted him to go up to the Temple, he doesn't hesitate. As he obeyed, he became a participant in God's amazing choreography, walking up to Mary and Joseph, taking the infant Jesus in his arms, praising God for keeping His promise, then uttering words of prophecy, which Mary took to heart.

This still isn't the end of the Christmas story! Next a very elderly Anna enters the stage of God's choreographed masterpiece.

This is what we know about her:

- she was a prophetess, of the tribe of Asher.
- She was very old (84)
- she had married and lived with her husband for seven years, and was a widow until she was 84.
- She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Anna is a well-respected person in the temple, known to generations of families who come at Passover and at other times.
- Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."⁵

In God's choreographed Masterplan, this well-known old saint "just happens" to approach the Holy Family, starts praising God and telling all the people around her, who the child is and the significance of His life as Redeemer of God's people.

The Christmas story begins with a man, Zechariah, who doubted God would answer his prayer, and ends also with an old man and an old woman who cannot stop praising God for answering their prayer.

As we wrap up the Christmas story and move on, we are faced with a serious question.

⁵ Luke 2:36-38

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You see, to read God Word is to encounter God in person. Surely, coming regularly to Church, says that you want to be serious about your relationship with God; its no different than the way that young men and young women spend time in each others' company, is an indication of the seriousness of their relationship.

But the question we must face is this: will our commitment be like Zechariah's, who spent his time in the Temple performing the duties of a priest, but never getting to know God Himself. Which explains why he could not trust God when the angel Gabriel says, *God has heard your prayer ... you will have a son.*

Or, will our commitment be like that of Simeon, an ordinary man who consciously chose to invest his time into a living and dynamic relationship with Almighty God, waiting to be choreographed in God's "Final Act".

Or will our commitment be like that of Anna. An old woman whose life-long worship of God was simple and genuine. The praise which rolled off her lips, were part of her conversation with her Master.

2018 is waiting. You choose - will your relationship with God be like that of Zechariah, or grow to be like that of Simeon and Anna?

AMEN