

Anna the Prophetess

Waiting. The whole rationale for my life for as long as I can remember has been about waiting. Sometimes the waiting has been for something simple, such as someone bringing me some food to eat. Sometimes the waiting is for the Temple complex to quieten down at the end of the day, so that I can get my bed roll out and settle down to pray and doze in



quiet. Always it is in the hope that I will live long enough to see the Lord's anointed, the promised saviour of my people Israel. So every morning I wake up in the Portico of the Temple, here in the city of Jerusalem, and I watch and wait and pray. And at night like a watchman on the city walls, I watch and pray and doze. Unlike a watchman, I long for the anointed one to come, day or night. I long for Yahweh to come among us again as he did in the days of the Prophets, guiding us and raising us with a glimpse of his glory as he did with Moses.

I never used to be a person who could keep still. As a child my mother would complain that I was constantly on the move, moving from one household job to another, from one friend to another, from one place to another, and usually at a run. I had to keep busy, otherwise I would have had to think, rather than do. When I was 14 my parents took me to the village matchmaker, and a husband was chosen for me. I enjoyed being married. I enjoyed keeping the house in order and preparing food for my husband, ready for when he came in from working in the fields. We longed for a child, to be our hope and joy, and our eternity. I could carry a child for a few months, and then it would come before its time, and I would be sat there weeping over a tiny dead body again and again.

We always thought that we had time on our side. How arrogant we were. Seven short years after we married, my husband caught a fever while working in the fields. His men brought him home, but after a night of tossing and turning, drenched in sweat, Yahweh called him, and I was left alone. I did not know what to do without him. I had no reason or purpose in life. My husband's family came, to claim the family land. So I was left with nothing, no man to protect me, no son to grow into that role, no father

whose house I could return to, no dowry to offer a husband. I was a woman utterly without protection.

I just lay on my bed in the house I knew that I would have to give up, until the day that I gave up on it. I walked out with nothing. I walked with no purpose. My steps took me on the road to Jerusalem. I arrived unscathed, having slept by the roadside and been given food and water by the kindness of strangers. In Jerusalem my feet took me straight to the Temple on the top of the Mount, and when I walked through the Gate of the Cotton Market and stood gazing up at the Holy of Holies, I knew that I was safe, I knew that I was home.

I am now 84 years old, and I have not left the Temple since I arrived here, and that was 7 years after my marriage. I have a bed roll, which I open up each evening in a quiet corner to sleep. The Temple Guards know who I am, and they make sure I am not disturbed or harassed by visitors. They feel like the sons that I never had. Strangers buy me food from the food stalls just outside the walls. Friends bring me food and try to persuade me to leave and come and live with them in comfort, particularly now that I am old, but this is my home and I have here all that I need.

And the centre of my world, is Yahweh. In prayer and praise I pass my life. In return Yahweh allows me, Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher to be his mouthpiece. People come to me for words of wisdom, for words of advice, and I ask Yahweh, and sometimes he answers me. I am considered a Holy Woman. I find that funny really, little Anna who could never be still, has grown into a calm and quiet Holy Woman. I wonder what my parents would make of me now?

There is one thing now in my long life that I am still looking forward to, and that is the redemption of Israel. The Romans have been in our land far too long oppressing the people and disrespecting Yahweh. The time for him to act must be soon, I know it is coming. I hope that I live to see the land being cleansed and the people brought back into a right relationship with Yahweh, as we had in days of old. Living in the Temple alongside me is Simeon. He also is waiting for a sign from Yahweh. We have talked for hours and hours about what we expect to see, and we just don't know. We know we will know it when we see it.

Something is happening though. A great star has appeared in the sky. It is hanging to the south of here, almost over the place where the town of Bethlehem lies in a fold of the hills. The astrologers tell us that it is a new star. Yahweh has set a new star in the heavens and the earth is stirring. I can feel it in my bones. I have sat at the feet of the teachers of the law and the priests, here in the Temple and they are quoting the prophet:

‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’

They are having to talk quietly though. Herod has spies everywhere and he will not be pleased to hear that another ruler is coming to take his place. He is utterly ruthless in keeping his power, even killing his own sons to keep his throne. I am fasting and praying in the hope that the new ruler is coming now, and that I will live long enough to see him.

I heard a funny story a few days ago, about an excited group of shepherds who have been running around the countryside, telling everyone that they were out in their fields one night watching their flocks, when the heavens opened above them and a choir of angels came down and sang to them. They told of the glory of Yahweh, and that a baby had been born in Bethlehem, who was the Christ the son of Yahweh. They went to Bethlehem and there was a baby, just as the angels had foretold. But people are laughing at them and dismissing them as drunkards. There are so many people moving about the country at the moment, following the census ordered by Rome. There will have been babies born while pregnant women have been travelling. They were not exempt from travelling. It was purely accidental that they found one in Bethlehem. People cannot believe that Yahweh would speak to a group of shepherds out watching sheep. Yahweh speaks to prophets and Kings. I don't dismiss the shepherds. There is something in their story which stirs my heart and makes me feel almost like the giddy girl I once was. But a baby? That is not what we expected.

I have also heard tell of a group of merchants, or were they kings from far lands, or perhaps sages from the lands of the great deserts, I have heard all three descriptions of them. They rode into Jerusalem on their camels and made their way straight to Herod's Palace. Well, if they were merchants that would be a common occurrence. If you ride for weeks carrying a

valuable cargo to sell, you go to the man with the money. What most merchants don't do is get to the Palace, and then demand to see the new king which has been born. They told the Steward that they had seen a star in the East, and had followed it to the land of the Israelites because their writings told them that a great king was to be born, and they had come to pay their respects.

It was clear that they had never heard of Herod or his reputation. The poor Steward didn't know what to do. But Herod got to hear of them and ordered the travellers to be brought to him. The servants who have spoken to me, and told me this story, do so with hushed tones. Herod didn't do what they expected. He was courteous. He gave them food and drink and a place to rest after their long journey. He called for the learned men from the Temple, who reluctantly went at his imperious bidding. They took with them the scrolls of the prophets, and then had to inform Herod that the prophets of Israel and Judah had foretold a new great king would be born, in Bethlehem, just a few miles distance from Jerusalem. Herod remained calm, until he had sent the strangers on their way, with a smile on his face while asking them to let him know when they found the new king, so he too could come and pay his respects. Then when the gates closed he flew into a great rage, and today all Jerusalem is trembling, wondering what he is going to do next.

Ah, there goes Simeon, he is walking with great purpose towards a couple with a baby. I haven't seen him walk that fast in years. They must have come to have the baby presented or circumcised. I wonder why Simeon is so interested in them?

Now I know, now I have seen, now I am no longer waiting for the redemption of Israel. The time of our deliverance is upon us. Simeon got to the couple before me and he swept the baby up in his arms. Before everyone who came to watch what was going on, he declared that now that he had seen the salvation of the people of Israel, he could die in peace. I could see that everyone around him was looking at him as if he had finally gone senile. How could the redemption of Israel be in the hands of a tiny helpless baby. Then I stepped up to his shoulder and looked down on the baby, and I fell in love, utterly and completely. Simeon turned and looked at me, and he knew that I knew, that I also saw in this baby the fulfilment of all our prayers. He held out the baby to me. The mother made a small

step towards me, but Simeon just smiled at her and she relaxed and took a step backwards. As we stood there Simeon and I gazing down on the baby, for all the world like proud grandparents, he opened his eyes and I fell into the depths of them. In his eyes were worlds, was time and eternity. In his eyes were salvation and hope. In his eyes were Yahweh. Did time stop while we looked, did eternity begin? I don't know. I know the mother gently touched my arm and held out her arms for him. As I handed him back, Simeon spoke softly to his mother and father:

'This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.'

The mother and father didn't even look worried by these odd words, just thoughtful, as if they had heard such words before. I wondered then whether this was the baby seen by the shepherds and sought by the Wise Men, surely he was.

Then the women came, and the baby was given to the father, and he with his offering of two turtle doves headed towards the place of sacrifice. The mother was swept out to be taken for her ritual cleansing, following the birth of her baby, taken to the Pool of Siloam, where the impurity of blood would be washed away in the cleansing ritual waters.

And I stood there and watched them go, husband and wife to perform their rituals 40 days after the birth of their son, and I wondered, was it necessary? Was it necessary for two turtle doves to be sacrificed to release the baby from the obligation to become a Priest, as was required of all first born sons. Was it necessary to wash away of all traces of blood for a child born for the redemption of Israel. Would there not be blood shed, in returning this land to Yahweh? Then a shout went up, heard over all Jerusalem. Herod had finally lost patience, and sent out his soldiers. Jerusalem trembled, but we need not have worried, it was the children of Bethlehem that paid the price of his wrath as he had every male child under the age of 2 killed. The redemption of Israel has begun in the slaughter of innocent blood. How will it continue?