

## **Jan 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 'Not Your Average Little Old Lady' Anna : Luke 2:36-38**

This morning I want to introduce you to a Little Old Lady Who Was Far From Average. Her name is Anna, which is Hannah in the Hebrew and she is mentioned only once in the Bible; in Luke 2:36-38.

### **Luke 2:36-38**

***<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> 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.***

As I mentioned last Sunday when I spoke about Simeon, the background to this story relates to the time when Mary and Joseph brought the six week old baby Jesus to the Temple to present Him before God. There they met Simeon who had taken Jesus into his arms and excitedly praised God for him and the salvation He brought, before prophesying about the rejection Jesus would face and the pain that Mary would experience. A rather gloomy and somber moment you would think!

And then God sends along old Anna and she is a bundle of joy and happiness—just what they needed. Her name **means Graciousness or Grace**, and that's exactly how she comes across.

But as well as telling us her name, Luke also includes a surprising amount of further information about her.

He tells us that she was a **prophetess**, which in those days referred to a woman who was seen as inspired by God and who instructed others in the things that the Lord had revealed to them. Like Miriam and Deborah from the Old Testament, and the daughters of Philip that we read about in Acts, Anna would have been treated with respect and listened to with a sense of awe. She would have been a well known figure in the Temple precincts and particularly sought after for her words of knowledge and prayers of blessing.

She was from the **tribe of Asher** which was one of the Ten Lost Tribes. When the Nation was split into two kingdoms, Asher was part of the Northern kingdom that went into exile first and never returned in any great

numbers to the land of Israel. A few families obviously found their way back to their own country but not many. The tribe of Asher disgraced themselves in the history of the Jews by not fighting when they were needed and gaining only a portion of their allotted land because they relied on settlement rather than conquest to do so. So Anna was not from a well respected tribe at all.

She was **very old and a widow**. There are two ways of understanding the text here that tells us how old she was. The NIV translates it as saying that she was 84 years at this time. However, the original text can also support the view that she had been widowed for 84 years after being in her marriage for just 7 years. Being married at 13 or 14 years old which was the norm in those days, this would make her 104 or 105 years old. But whether she was 84 or 105 that still made her, in that society, very old indeed.

**She never left the Temple.** Indeed the Bible tells us that she worshipped there night and day praying and fasting. From these words the Scholars have deduced that Anna actually lived either in the Temple or very close by, and had done so since her husband had died. There were some small rooms off the court of the women, and it is suggested by some that she may well have been given one of those as her own. It is quite possible that her parents had been reasonably wealthy and had set aside a provision for her upon which she had existed for so many years. For her lifestyle was basic, her expenses small, and the gifts from the faithful would have been helpful.

One writer says of Anna:-

***"She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying."***

***Really... "she never left the Temple."***

***Where did she sleep? At the temple.***

***Where did she eat? At the temple.***

***Where did she bathe? At the temple.***

***She did not have an apartment near the temple she lived in the temple!***

***Day and night.***

***She never left.***

***Today we would call her a homeless woman...***

***a sort of a "spiritual bag lady..."***

***living in the Temple park.***

***And what did she do?***

***She "worshipped day and night."***

***How?***

***By "praying and fasting."***

***A pretty good description of a godly woman.***

***Worshipping day and night***

***praying and fasting.***

But as well as these facts about Anna, we can also read between the lines and discover that here was a woman who had endured suffering. After 7 years of marriage her husband had died. It's not hard to imagine the pain that would have caused.

We can also safely assume that in those seven years they had been unable to bear children otherwise her widowhood for 84 years would not have been emphasized as it was, and her children would have taken her time rather than the Temple. Indeed, it is surprising that a widow so young did not remarry—however if she had been labeled as barren, which was seen as a stigma in that society, then a new husband would have been hard to find. So to the suffering caused by her husband's death when she was still in her early twenties, may have been added the suffering and disdain caused by her childlessness.

But whatever the reason for her remaining a widow it seems most likely that it was her suffering that caused her to dedicate her life to wholly serving, and worshipping God.

It's strange isn't it, that pain and suffering can make you bitter or purer. It can cause you to move away from God or closer to Him. It can force you deep into the pit of denial and depression, or it can lift you into that place where in the midst of your tears, you cling to your belief that God can even use this to enhance your future life and ministry for Him.

It is also a wonderful reality that God's uses the sufferings we endure to customize our lives, making us His chosen instruments for His pre-determined purposes. We see that in the OT account of Joseph. As a young man he was beaten up and then sold into slavery by his brothers. Sold in an Egyptian market place his life continued to deteriorate and included unjust accusations and prison. Yet Joseph could later say that God took all the suffering and evil that had so greatly affected his life over a number of years

and used it to make him His instrument for the deliverance of His people. And there are many stories just like that in the Bible and today.

Anna's story is one of them. As she drew closer to God so He enriched her love and devotion for Him. And God blessed her with the spirit of a prophetess and used her to encourage and to teach His children, and especially to promote the truth of a coming Redeemer. And as the years passed she became a unique figure in the Temple of God. An old lady who was far from average as she refused to give up her ministry for God simply because she was getting old. And maybe that was the reason why God gave her the greatest privilege ever when her years were nearly over. For it was Anna who knew that this Jesus was the Messiah, and like one of those energized bunnies from the battery advertisement, she sped around Jerusalem telling everyone who looked for Him, that the Messiah had come.

It's a small but brilliant story and it teaches us two very important things that some of us may need to put into operation straight away and we will all need to remember for the future.

1. When you are going through suffering and pain don't be tempted to believe that God has abandoned you and doesn't care. He feels for you in your pain and he waits for you to entrust even this over to Him. For he has the power to use it in your life to make you a blessing for others, and to eventually bless you through who you will become, and through what you will do.
2. Whatever your age, if you commit yourself to renewed worship and devotion—and that may involve for you as it did for Anna, intensive prayer and fasting—then God will give you the glorious opportunity of sharing effectively with others the incredible news that their Rescuer—whatever they are going through or enduring—their Redeemer has come.