

# BREAKING OPEN THE WORD

**PRESENTATION**

**2ND FEBRUARY, 2025**



A weekly reflection and sermon,  
with study and prayer guides  
following the RCL Lectionary

Dennis Webster  
<https://substack.com/@tastigr>

Principal Service  
Malachi 3.1-5

Psalms 24.[1-6] 7-10

Hebrews 2.14-18

Luke 2.22-40

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Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

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Introduction

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Reflection

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Discussion Questions

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Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

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O God, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so  
many and great dangers,  
that by reason of the frailty of our nature  
we cannot always stand upright:  
Grant to us such strength and protection,  
as may support us in all dangers,  
and carry us through all temptations:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## INTRODUCTION

In the sermon "Recognising Christ Among Us," Dennis reflects on the profound significance of mercy as the core of God's message to humanity.

Drawing on Scripture readings from Luke and Hebrews, he emphasises that proper recognition of Christ comes from humility and faith rather than status or wealth.

The stories of Simeon and Anna serve as powerful examples of steadfast devotion; these faithful elders eagerly acknowledged the arrival of the Messiah in the humble form of the Christ child.

Through their example, Dennis calls the congregation to remain attentive to God's presence in their lives, especially in the overlooked and ordinary moments.

Dennis further explores the expected and unexpected ways Christ reveals Himself, challenging the audience to remain receptive to his presence amidst life's struggles and complexities.

He underscores the importance of recognising Christ in the marginalised and impoverished, emphasising that spiritual poverty can be as significant as physical poverty.

Dennis encourages the congregation to embrace the call to actively demonstrate God's mercy and love, like Simeon and Anna, in all their interactions.

By doing so, they embody the light of Christ in the world and engage in the transformative power of faith, promoting justice, love, and compassion.

### Prayer Prompts

- Pray for the courage to live out the principles discussed in the sermon, particularly in challenging situations you may face this week.
- Think about extending grace to others just as you have received it, and pray for opportunities to show kindness to someone in need.
- You can ask for wisdom to make decisions that align with your faith and the lessons learned from the sermon.
- Think about your relationships. Inspired by the message's key themes, pray for healing and reconciliation.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,  
your gift of life so that we, made in your image  
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

In the last week, as Christ's gentle but direct words were reflected from the National Cathedral in Washington pulpit, the call to the whole world has become increasingly noted. Bishop Budde did not ask the administration to stop what they were doing; she asked for one thing: mercy. At the heart of the messianic manifest, showing Christ in the world, mercy is at the heart of God's call to us. Micah's insistence that no amount of ritual can ever save the world, but only the principles of justice, mercy, and our relationship with God matter. This is the same God who knit us together in our mother's womb. This is the same God to whom we are dedicated. This is the same God, who, through our understanding of offering, not physical, but of the heart, calls on us to change.

The anointing of David reminds us that God looks at our hearts rather than our status or outward appearance. David, deemed too insignificant to join his brothers in the presence of the prophet Nathan, was busy tending the sheep. As we discussed forty days ago while reflecting on the Christmas nativity scenes, shepherds first marvelled at the birth of the Christ child. On the eighth day after his birth, Jesus was named and circumcised. Later, he appeared in the Temple when Mary offered thanks upon her ritual reintegration into the community.

Today, we focus on the Jerusalem

temple, where faithful elders Simeon and Anna joyfully recognise the arrival of the Messiah. Their acknowledgment of the Christ child inspires us to see God's promise not in grand displays of power but in the humble devotion of a simple family and the steadfastness of the elderly faithful.

In Luke 2:22-24, we learn about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the temple by purification laws, presenting Him as their firstborn to the Lord. Their offering of two turtledoves or pigeons reflects their modest situation, fulfilling the requirement for those who cannot afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:8). Here, we observe the profound reality of the Incarnation: The Word of God becomes flesh, not through wealth, but through the simplicity and faith of ordinary people.

God does not first reveal Himself in glory; He comes among the lowly, embodying the conditions of human existence. This aligns with Hebrews 2:14-18, which emphasises that Christ fully identifies with us, sharing in our suffering and being tested to become our compassionate high priest.

Simeon, a righteous man, had long hoped for Israel's comfort. The Holy Spirit promised he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. When he holds the child, Jesus, he declares:

> "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).

However, his message is not entirely uplifting. Addressing Mary, he warns her:

> "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your soul too" (Luke 2:34-35).

Simeon conveys a profound truth: Christ brings salvation but also provokes division. Some will rise because of Him, while others may fall. He will become a stumbling block, unveiling the true nature of the human heart. Simeon and Anna serve as models of faithfulness and devotion—their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah encourages us to be attentive to God's presence. Simeon and Anna waited patiently for the coming of the Messiah. This point enables me to trust in God's timing and remain hopeful in our lives, like you.

This prophecy unfolds early in Jesus' ministry in Luke 4 when He returns to Nazareth and reads from Isaiah in the synagogue. At first, the listeners are amazed by his words. However, when He speaks of God's mercy extending beyond Israel to include the widow from Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, they become enraged and reject Him.

Why this reaction? Because Christ's presence exposes hidden insecurities in people's hearts, those comfortable in their self-righteousness could not accept this new truth. Yet, the humble, marginalised, and faithful recognise Him and find hope in Him. This reflects the significant reversal of the Kingdom: God's salvation comes to the humble, not the proud.

This rejection is quite profound. Referring to Jesus as "Mary's son," who we know pondered the words in her heart at the time of his presentation in the Temple, feels awkward in light of the claims that Jesus is no better than his brothers and sisters. A technon, often translated as 'carpenter', was not a privileged position in society, as I once heard from a Cathedral pulpit. Jesus was born and raised in poverty, and the community knew it. To hear Jesus read and then proclaim was a bold affront. "Doctor, heal yourself first!" This man must be rejected because we know him. He possesses no other skills except for working with wood.

Simeon and Anna personify the faithful elders of Israel—those who have waited, prayed, and remained steadfast without succumbing to despair. When Christ appears, they embrace Him without hesitation. I often hear people in congregations say, "I can't do anything at my age." We may not have the subtlety of limb and posture, but wisdom is matured like a fine cheese or wine. It improves with age and tastes and sees the goodness of the Lord.

The presence of God is often more apparent for many as they grow old and weary than for those looking for a revolution to either free them from debt or improve their status in life. Peace and prosperity are not measured in wealth or status; they are measured in the glory of God. Simeon encapsulates this directly: to be a light to lighten the nations and to be the glory of your people, Israel.

How often do we miss or encounter Christ in our midst? Do we expect Him to show up in grand ways, or are we receptive to his presence in the humble and suffering? A chance encounter in the street, a fleeting nod in the supermarket, a moment when travelling when we are flawed by the simplicity but complex view of creation. Often, it is in these unexpected places that we find the most profound connections to Him.

Our elders—those with years of experience and devotion—often guide us to recognise Christ, especially when He appears in surprising forms. They engage in talking, sharing, and showing hospitality. They bring an awareness from our journey of being made holy in God, purified by our experiences and attuned to the presence of Christ around us. We are called to testify to Christ's presence like Simeon and Anna. Like them, we are to look for Christ in their everyday interactions and experiences to help them live out their faith actively and intentionally. Time, which should inspire us to seek his likeness in every aspect of our lives.

It will not always be easy. Christ's presence transforms relationships and encourages people to embody love and grace in their interactions. Many in the community are impoverished, not only fiscally but also spiritually. There are children whose tears go unnoticed because no one is there to notice. Here, we take solace in that the Lord does hear

the cry of the poor: blessed be the poor. They demand our love, mercy and justice. Sometimes, from our perspective, illustrated in the words of one of our hymns last week:

3 Warm Father God, hugging every child,  
feeling all the strains of human living,  
caring and forgiving  
till we're reconciled:  
Hail and hosanna,  
warm Father God!

4 Old, aching God, grey with endless care,  
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,  
glad of good surprises,  
wiser than despair:  
Hail and hosanna,  
old, aching God!

This leads me to wonder: Are we prepared to encounter Christ in the way he chooses to come? Will we stumble over Him or rise in faith alongside him? Christ has, as we are reminded through this time of Epiphany, no hands, eyes or ears than ours. Setting our hearts on fire with love for God and allowing ourselves to be a channel of God's peace, the teachings of our loving Saviour, rejected by his townsfolk, a stumbling block for those who had the authority to make a difference, and a sword that pierced the very heart of the one who gave him life and nurture, we look back at our lives and await for the presence of God to be revealed in our love and nurture of others.

The hymn last week concluded:

5 Young, growing God, eager, on the move,  
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,  
crying out for justice,  
giving all you have:  
Hail and hosanna,  
young, growing God!

6 Great, living God, never fully known,  
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,  
closer yet than breathing,  
everlasting home:  
Hail and hosanna,  
great, living God.<sup>1</sup>

Like Simeon and Anna, may we stay vigilant with open hearts, looking far beyond our seeing, and know that when the moment arrives, we are to welcome the Saviour who humbly reveals the depths of God's mercy.

<sup>1</sup>Brian Wren: Bring Many Names Words © 1994 Hope Publishing Company

## QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

How does recognising Christ in life's daily, humble aspects change how we view our everyday experiences?

The sermon discussed how Simeon and Anna recognised Jesus' significance in a simple family setting, rejecting the idea that we only find God in grand displays.

Can you think of a specific moment in your life where you saw something sacred or meaningful in an ordinary situation?

What does the moment when Simeon holds Jesus and declares him his Saviour teach us about hope?

The sermon mentioned Simeon's declaration of Jesus as a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel.

How can we foster hope in our lives and the lives of others, particularly during difficult times?

How can we be like Simeon and Anna, waiting patiently for God's presence?

The sermon highlighted how Simeon and Anna embody faithfulness and devotion while waiting for the Messiah.



What practices can you implement to develop patience and attentiveness in your spiritual journey?

Why do you think many people reacted negatively when Jesus shared that God's mercy would extend beyond Israel?

The sermon described how Jesus faced rejection after mentioning God's mercy for those considered outsiders.

Could you reflect on your difficulty accepting someone or something that challenged your beliefs? How did you cope with those feelings?

How can we demonstrate mercy and justice in our interactions with others, as emphasised in the sermon?

The sermon pointed out that mercy is at the heart of God's call and that we should embody those principles.

What is one specific way you can show mercy to someone in your life this week?

#### DISCUSSION STARTERS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- When do we see Christ in our everyday lives?
  - This relates to the sermon's theme of recognising Christ in the humble and ordinary, as emphasised through the stories of Simeon and Anna.
- Why do you think God wants us to focus on mercy?
  - The sermon highlighted that mercy is at the heart of God's call to us, as discussed in the context of Bishop Budde's message.
- Can you think of a time when you felt you were being called to show mercy to someone?
  - This connects to the idea that our actions should reflect our faith, similar to how Mary and Joseph offered their humble sacrifice.
- What do you think it means to have faith like Simeon and Anna?
  - Reflect on their steadfastness and waiting for God's promise, as seen in their recognition of Jesus at the temple.
- How can we show love to those who might feel marginalised or overlooked?
  - This touches on the sermon's message about recognising Christ in the marginalised and responding with love and justice.

## Walking Gently on Sacred Ground



This five-day devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend.

### Day 1 Luke 2:22-40

The story of Simeon and Anna at the temple highlights how recognising Christ often comes through humility and patience. In a culture that values power and prestige, we see God's glory reflected in the simplicity of a young family offering their child to the Lord. Such devotion challenges us to avoid societal norms prioritising wealth and influence and instead embrace the hearts seeking God.

This reveals an essential truth about faith: God's presence is often found in our lives quiet, unassuming moments. Just as Simeon and Anna waited faithfully for the Messiah, we are called to recognise Christ in our everyday interactions and experiences. In these moments, filled with grace and humility, we can experience the depths of God's mercy and love.

- How do you recognise moments of Christ's presence in your daily life?
- What aspects of humility do you struggle with when encountering God's call?
- How can you be more present and attentive to others around you?
- Pray for the eyes to see Christ in ordinary moments.
- Ask God for a heart of humility as you serve others.

### Day 2 Hebrews 2:14-18

In Hebrews, we are reminded of Christ's complete identification with humanity, sharing our struggles and suffering. This beautiful truth assures us that we are never alone in our trials; Christ walks beside us, understanding our pain. Accepting this reality makes us more compassionate towards ourselves and others.

As followers of Christ, our invitation is to extend that same compassion to the world around us, acting as Christ's hands and feet. How can we

embody this love in our interactions? By embracing our vulnerabilities, we foster a space where healing and grace can enter our lives and those around us.

- What pain in your life do you need to lay before Christ today?
- How can you show compassion to someone who is suffering?
- In what ways can your experiences of suffering bring hope to others?
- Pray for the strength to bear the burdens of your friends and family.
- Seek ways to embody Christ's compassion in your community.

### **Day 3      Luke 4:16-30**

In Luke 4, we witness Jesus' rejection in Nazareth, where those familiar with Him could not accept his message. This decisive moment reflects how often we miss Christ because we confine Him to our expectations. When we place God in a box, we risk overlooking how He works in our lives and communities.

The hymn speaks of the "falsehood and unkindness" that Jesus addresses. We must reflect on how easily we dismiss people or situations that challenge our beliefs. Are we prepared to confront our biases and open our hearts to God's radical love? Embracing this challenge enables us to fulfil God's call to love and serve **all** people

- What biases do you hold that may prevent you from recognising Christ's presence?
- Are there people or situations you've dismissed that God may call you to embrace?
- How can you cultivate openness to God's surprising ways in your life?
- Pray for the ability to see beyond your comfort zone and embrace God's call.
- Please seek forgiveness for any judgments you've placed on others.

### **Day 4      Micah 6:6-8**

Micah reminds us that God's desires extend beyond ritual and tradition to a relationship defined by justice, mercy, and humility. This challenges us to examine our faith practices: are they rooted in genuine connection with

God or routine? True worship is living out God's call to love and serve others.

As we navigate our faith journey, we must ensure that our actions align with God's call for justice and equity. Living justly and loving mercy means prioritising the needs of the marginalised and responding with compassion to those in need. By doing so, we reflect God's heart for humanity.

- How can you incorporate acts of justice in your faith practice?
- What does it mean for you to love mercy in your daily life?
- How do you struggle with balancing ritual and relationship with God?
- Pray for a heart that seeks justice in your community.
- Ask God to help you recognise opportunities to show mercy to others.

### **Day 5      John 13:34-35**

Jesus' command to love one another as He has loved us caps our journey throughout this devotional. Understanding the depth of God's mercy and grace shapes our hearts to reflect that same love toward others. This command is a transformative invitation to engage with the world around us.

As we conclude this devotional, let's challenge ourselves to live out this command actively. Love isn't just a feeling; it's a daily choice. By embodying Christ's love in our interactions, we invite others to experience his presence through us. Let this be a living testament to our faith as we recognise Christ.

- How can you show love to those in your life this week?
- How have you experienced Christ's love in your own life?
- How can your actions reflect Christ's love and mercy to others?
- Pray for the courage to act in love daily.
- Ask God to help you be a vessel of his love in your community.

# End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina:     The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)  
                      The Gospel of Matthew  
                      The Gospel of John

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke:**, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1991

The Worship Cloud: articles by N.T. Wright and Jane Williams  
The Vine Newsletter SPCK

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

Bible Hub



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Prepared by Rev'd Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville, Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

Acknowledgement of use appreciated

Subscription to "www.breaking-open-the-word.org" is available.  
Published every weekend, usually on Saturday evening, AEST.

Biblical Quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version - Anglicised, which is © 1990 the National Churches of Christ, USA.

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