Lovely to be with you this morning for this Candlemas Choral Eucharist. Good too to be coming this evening to the Candlemas Carol service – a service at which we shall be marking ten years of Anna Chaplaincy.

For those unfamiliar with Anna Chaplaincies they are chaplaincies that focus on pastoral care in residential and nursing homes. They derive their name, of course, from the prophetess Anna whom we encounter, together with Simeon, in today’s Gospel reading. We know nothing else about them outside of these few verses. They are not mentioned in any of the other Gospels – nor in the rest of the New Testament – yet here Luke gives them a pivotal role in telling the story.

With Simeon and Anna, and the encounter that day in the Temple, we come to the end of his birth narratives – and, apart from one more story of Jesus at the age of twelve, again at the Temple, and a couple of linking verses – Luke leaps forward to Jesus’ adult ministry, heralded by another prophet, his cousin, John the Baptist. And it might be easy enough at that point to pass over Simeon and Anna as interesting appendages with little to add to the main plot. But dig a little deeper and a different picture begins to emerge.

Both of them sees clearly, in ways others didn’t, the significance of Jesus. Most of those, priests and people alike, gathered in the Temple that day would just have seen a young couple with a baby coming to make the required sacrifice for those without much money – a pair of doves or two young pigeons.

But first Simeon and then, as far as we can tell quite independently Anna, sees in the baby God’s decisive intervention in the history of his people, the birth of the one to be the redemption of Jerusalem and the glory of God’s people Israel.

And for Simeon, of course, as we celebrate today, the vision goes even wider than that. For Jesus comes, not just for Israel, but to be the light that lightens the Gentiles – the Saviour of all humankind.
All of which leaves me with a very obvious question. How was it that Simeon and Anna could see what God was doing in this situation whilst others couldn’t?

For Simeon, a man who was righteous and devout, Luke stresses the key role played by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was upon him (v. 25); it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit (v. 26); and he was moved by the Spirit (v. 27). For Anna the hint lies in the fact that she was a prophet – a person with the ability to see into the mind of God and to tell what she saw. Both of them, therefore, had their spiritual eyes wide open. Something that most of the rest of us struggle with much of the time.

Although I’m not suggesting that we have to follow Anna’s self-discipline of worshipping, fasting and praying night and day for decade after decade, it is true that for her, as for Simeon, their spiritual antennae were kept tuned in their deeply embedded prayerful lives.

One of the exciting things happening in this Diocese at the moment is the growth in the numbers of people developing their own Personal Discipleship Plan. It’s a scheme that provides a few questions and a basic template to enable people to take responsibility for their own development and which can provide them with a helpful structure within which to grow. Nothing very new or novel about that.

We can see elements of that in these pictures of Simeon and Anna. But another answer to the question ‘Why could they see what others couldn’t?’ lies in the fact that they’d been doing this for a long time.

And that’s worth remembering in a generation that tends to devalue the elderly, that places a huge stress on the skill sets of the young and dismisses the wisdom of the old, which focuses on endless discussions on the costs of social care and the demographic time bomb in a very negative assessment of old age.

Perhaps we need to remember Simeon and Anna – and the God who spoke unexpectedly through them to their generation.