Back in 1927, a boy from the Netherlands called Bertje Oosterman wrote a letter to Father Christmas. In his letter he asked for a toy castle, an indian costume, a bicycle made of chocolate, a canary and a new cage for his rabbits. Sadly, his letter got lost until a few years ago when it finally turned up at a car boot sale. A TV producer called Jean Olf Lammers bought it for £10. „I’ve been collecting everything to do with St Nicholas for years,“ he told a newspaper. He tried to find the boy who wrote it and finally tracked down Mr Oosterman, by now aged 81, in his antique shop in The Hague. Without telling him why, Mr Lammers invited Mr Oosterman to dinner in a famous restaurant where he gave him all the presents he had asked for all those years ago... the toy castle, the indian costume, the chocolate bicycle, the canary and the rabbit cage. He may have been over seventy years late but, as the old man said, „You know, Santa doesn’t forget anything.„

I was reminded of that story about an old man’s Christmas surprise when thinking about Simeon and Anna, who we’ve just heard about in Luke chapter 2. Waiting for so long, but with their patience finally rewarded.

Although we’re not told Simeon’s age, it sounds as if he doesn’t think it will be long before it’s time for him to meet his Maker. And Luke tells us that Anna is at least 84 years old - maybe even older!

As the years go by, I have a growing appreciation of the fact that these two have an honoured place in the story of the coming of Christ into the world. Because they reassure us that Jesus Christ is good news, not just for the young and ‘with it’, but for the older and increasingly ‘without it’ too. It’s good news of great joy for *all* people...

It’s all focused in what Simeon says. His song of praise has been sung in Christian worship, day in and day out, for many centuries now. Indeed, we shall hear it sung later in this service and again during Evensong this afternoon. We know it best from the first two words of its Latin translation: ‘Nunc dimittis’. It simply means something like ‘Now let me go...’

„Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.„ For Simeon, the long wait is now over. God has finally fulfilled his promise, the promise he made personally to Simeon many years ago, that he would meet the baby born to bring peace and hope to God’s hurting world. ‘...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’.

There’s a detective story by Dorothy Sayers in which a criminal rushes into a barber’s shop and demands of the proprietor, „Are you prepared to dye?“ The initial shock wears off as Mr Budd the barber realises that this isn’t a homicidal maniac but a potential client wanting to change the colour of his hair in order to disguise himself and so avoid capture by the police! Are you prepared to dye?

In the last chapter of his memoirs, ‘A Traveller in Romance’, the novelist Somerset Maugham wrote this: “‘There are moments when I have so palpitating an eagerness for death that I could fly to it as to the arms of a lover - I am drunk with the thought of it. It seems to me to offer the final and absolute freedom. There are indeed days when I feel that I have done everything too often, known too many people, read too many books, seen too many pictures, statues, churches and fine houses, and listened to too much great music. I neither believe in immortality nor desire it. I should like to die quietly and painlessly, and I am content to be assured that with my last breath my soul, with its aspirations and its weaknesses, will dissolve into nothingness.’“

A year later, shortly before Maugham died at the age of 91, his nephew Robin visited his famous uncle at his luxury villa on the Mediterranean Riviera. Robin writes:
“The following afternoon, I found Willie reclining on a sofa, peering through his spectacles at a Bible which had very large print. He looked horribly wizened, and his face was grim. “I’ve been reading the Bible you gave me - and I’ve come across the quotation: ‘What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul?’ I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child. Of course, it’s all a lot of bunk. But the thought is quite interesting all the same.’

“That evening, in the drawing room after dinner, Willie flung himself down onto the sofa. ‘Oh, Robin, I’m so tired...’ He gave a gulp and buried his head in his hands. Willie looked up and his grip tightened on my hands. He was staring toward the floor. His face was contorted with fear, and he was trembling violently. Willie’s face was ashen as he stared in horror ahead of him. Suddenly, he began to shriek. “Go away! I’m not ready. I’m not dead yet. I’m not dead yet, I tell you!” His high-pitched terror-struck voice seemed to echo from wall to wall. I looked round, but the room was empty as before.”

When it finally comes to it, the fear of death, our culture’s great unmentionable, is real and it is universal. To say otherwise reveals an empty bravado that is more than likely to come unstuck at the end, just as it seems to have done for Somerset Maugham.

But Simeon, you see, is prepared and quite ready to ‘die’ in the more conventional use of that expression. He is entirely ready to meet his Maker. And this is how he serves as a pattern for us today. This is the astonishing claim we find at the heart of the story of the birth of Christ. That this little baby, this stark picture of helpless vulnerability, fresh - or perhaps not so fresh! - from his stay in a borrowed manger, this Jesus makes it possible for us to face whatever the future holds, even something as apparently final as death itself. Not with fear but with trust. Not with despair but with hope. “I’m ready now, Lord. In your own good time, let me go...” Nunc dimittis.

There’s a famous painting by the 17th century Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo which shows the sleeping Christ-child being watched over by two angels. It looks like a depiction of rest and contentment. But look more closely and you see that the baby is lying on a cross and his right hand is resting on a skull. Indeed, this is what the painting is called: ‘The Infant Christ Asleep on the Cross’. What Simeon dimly perceived as this child’s future we can now see clearly with the benefit of hindsight. We know that this baby grew up to become the man whose death would bring about salvation from sin and rescue from the curse of death. So that each and every one of us, as we recognise this holy Child for who he is and adjust our lives to fit, can say along with Simeon, ‘Nunc dimittis’. “I’m ready now, Lord. In your own good time, let me go...”

Can we say that? Of course, we hope it won’t be just yet, but basic statistics assure us that, for some of us, the date of our final journey is probably not that far away. And although this is more likely to be so for those for us who are older, it’s actually something that all of us need to be ready for. For none of us knows when it will be our turn.

‘Nunc dimittis’ - ‘I’m ready now, Lord. In your own good time, let me go...’.

Thank you, Father, for the example of Simeon and Anna, and for their part in the story of the coming of Christ into the world. Grant us, Lord, the wisdom and the grace to use aright the time that is left to us on earth. Lead us to repent of our sins, the evil we have done and the good we have not done; and strengthen us to follow the steps of your Son, in the way that leads to the fullness of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.