When you become a parent, you automatically become ‘expert’ at a new range of skills that had previously never been needed. For me one of the more surprising of these was the need to be a ‘noticer of things.’ These days, even after many years I spend what feels like a disproportionate amount of my life looking for things that family members have lost. It appears that along with the role of mother, comes, automatically, the role of chief-looker for things: keys; school bags; jumpers; school shoes; the thing I had in my hand a moment ago; hair bobbles; that folder with all my important stuff in.

I have learnt a lot in my role of chief-looker for things. I have learnt that it is very easy to look and look and simply not to see; I’ve learnt that there is a skill to seeing, one you can improve; I’ve learnt that the best way to see things is to practice noticing them. The pinnacle of my ‘looking for things’ career came when I located an errant school bag over the phone, when I was at a conference in Hong Kong. It is a most useful skill.

I would like to suggest that the skill of crack noticer lies at the heart of our gospel reading for today. This role, does not, of course include the locating of lost stuff, but it does comprise the skill of noticing; of seeing beyond what is obvious; the skill of not just looking but of seeing with the whole of our being.

The Gospel passage tells one of my favourite stories – that first moment when Simeon and then Anna encountered the God who had arrived in the most unexpected form – that of a tiny and vulnerable baby. Beneath this simple story lies the call to each one of us to become people expert in the task not only of looking for God but of noticing him when he meets us, as he always does, in unexpected ways.

There is something truly remarkable about Simeon and Anna but it is something that is easy to miss. Christian artwork suggests to us that it was easy to recognise the infant Jesus for who he was. Who could fail to notice the divine glow, resplendent with shiny halo? The reality, of course, is that Jesus was not so easy to identify. If he had been, everyone would have recognised him. As it is, only a few, very particular, people were able truly to see him for who he was. Simeon and Anna are most probably at the forefront of these people – unlike the shepherds they had no host of angels announcing his arrival from the heavens; unlike the magi no star arose for them in the East. All Simeon and Anna had was their faithfulness, their wisdom and their own eyes... but still, miraculously, they recognised him.

The skills of Simeon and Anna are skills for which we are in desperate need in our world, in our nation and in our churches. I don’t know about you but I struggle to watch or read the news at the moment. It seems as though everything is shot through with more than the usual amount of chaos and despair. In the midst of this we need Simeons and Annas aplenty to point us beyond the gloom to the places where God is at work – dancing the joy back into the world that he created.

So what are these skills, the skills of Simeon and Anna? There are many – this morning I will focus on just two.

The first is the skill of imagination – that ability to see beyond what we know to be true. By rights neither Simeon nor Anna ought to have recognised Jesus. They were waiting for someone to redeem Israel. There were, at the time, a variety of expectations about what this redeemer might have been like – he might have been a King like David; he might have been a mighty warrior; he might even have been an angel. What he would not have been was a tiny baby. And yet... and yet, as soon as he entered the temple both Simeon and Anna recognised who he was.

It is quite hard for us to appreciate how remarkable their response was. If Simeon and Anna were anything like most other Jews in the first century they would have known exactly what redemption meant – the Messiah would have
come at the head of an army brandishing power, splendour and might as he drove out the Romans. The redemption of Israel, when it came, was expected to be dramatic and un-missable.

The arrival of Jesus in the temple was anything but dramatic. His entrance into the daily hustle and bustle of temple worship, was barely noticeable, his tiny form encased not with military hardware but in his mother’s arms; accompanied with no splendour and majesty other than the paupers’ sacrifice of two doves. By rights no one who awaited the redemption of Israel should have noticed him at all but two people did.

Simeon and Anna though so different in many ways both saw that their God had come to them, that redemption had occurred, that salvation had broken forth before their eyes. With a leap of remarkable imagination, they were able to lay aside their expectations, their fixed understanding of what would be and instead were able to see what was.

Now, as much as ever, those of us who seek to tread faithfully in the footsteps of faithful, wise Simeon and Anna need to be people of imagination. People who can see beyond the obvious, people who are able to lay aside our expectations of what we know God will do, to see what God is actually doing. All of this requires imagination – the greatest imagination we can muster.

But it needs something else too. The condition most likely to suffocate any shreds of imagination we might be able to conjure up is anxiety. Anxiety – such as runs rife through politics and the media at the moment – sucks all oxygen to itself; claiming that it, alone, should shape the way we see the world and the decisions we make about it.

The antidote to anxiety is attentiveness – attentiveness to the things of God; attentiveness to Scripture, to the people we meet, to the world around us and to ourselves. For me, one of the striking features of the story about Anna was that she had spent day and night in the temple, fasting and praying. In other words she was so deeply and profoundly attuned to the nature of God that when Jesus appeared in the form of the tiniest baby, her years of attentiveness bore fruit, fired her imagination and helped her see God before her in expected form. Anna’s attentiveness took years to craft – Luke suggests it took a whole 84 years – but eventually after years of faithful waiting it reached fruition.

A couple of weeks ago, one of my favourite poets of all time – Mary Oliver – died. She was, you might say, a modern day Anna, with an incredible talent for both imagination and attentiveness. She had many things to say about the importance of paying attention, one of which was this:

“Ten times a day something happens to me like this - some strengthening throb of amazement - some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

Mary Oliver, like Anna, spent her life practicing the skill of attentiveness. It is not a skill that can be formed overnight. Such a skill takes years to grow: years of faithful noticing over time grow into attentiveness; years of attentiveness into wild, wise imagination – an imagination that opens the windows of the soul onto what God is doing in the world often beyond our notice.

Maybe, just maybe, my role as chief noticer of things is teaching me the basics I need to become an apprentice in the school of Simeon, of Anna and of Mary Oliver, and, if I stick at it for another seventy years or so, one day I might inherit the wild, wisdom of those who have gone before me.

This Candlemas may we remember and celebrate the attentive imagination of Simeon and Anna. May we pray together that we will have cause to echo deep within us Simeon’s words of gratitude and awe – in the midst of the messiness of our world, in its despair and chaos, in its misery and gloom – truly our eyes have seen salvation.

Amen.