

Saturday after 5 Trinity C — St Helen's Church, Abingdon
26 July 2025

Anna and Joachim,



Exodus 24.3–8 / Matthew 13.24–30

Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

ETHER STANDARDS FOR ATTIRE AT WORSHIP have *risen* markedly over the millennia since Moses dashed the blood of the covenant on the people assembled before the Tabernacle, or perhaps it's that the efficiency of laundry detergent has *declined* (or *both*, I suppose). Because one can hardly imagine the great and the good shuffling into their places at St Paul's in the City, or Christ Church in Oxford, or even here at St Helen's, assembling in our Sunday best, prepared to be doused with blood from Moses's sacrificial offerings — however much local dry cleaners might benefit from a modern liturgical recuperation of ancient Israel's practices. Certainly the iconographic tradition shows figures such as Anna and Joachim and their wee lass Mary standing in the Temple with unstained robes and tunics, there to affirm annually their commitment to the covenant that God wrought with the twelve tribes a long time ago, in a world that is now far, far away. 'Do this, and live', saith the Lord; and the people said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'

The covenant-renewal ceremony that Moses describes in today's

lesson bears some comparison to the celebration of a wedding anniversary, though the latter case usually involves less bloodshed. In each case, the affirmation of something begun more or less long ago *upholds* and *confirms* the prior covenant — in one case by repeating the words ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’, and in the other by remembering and recommitting to the nuptial vows. In each case, the endorsement of the vows made beforetime doesn’t imply that these promises had *worn out* — that’s a uselessly flat interpretation of Israel’s covenant with God, and just as uncharitable when applied to marriage. Promises that bind us to a transcendent mutuality, a solidarity on which so much joy depends, warrant our reverent attention. And in both cases, we reach beyond the ordinary capacity of human determination and attention — committing *exclusively* to one other, offering radical *vulnerability* to the other, and pledging an *eternal fidelity* to the other — the *extremity* of such covenants elicits from us a regular public assurance that we *know* what we’re *doing* (as well as anyone can) and that we *stand by* our word freely given: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death relieve us of mortal devotion and delivers us to the eternal fruits of our promises.

Joachim and Anna, born under the great and irrevocable covenant, embody a manner of life *faithful* to that covenant, righteous under the law all the days of their lives. By their bearing, nurturing, teaching and cherishing the Blessed Virgin, they embrace and flourish in trust for God and God’s Law. And over and above their parenting an outstanding young’un — they inform our imagination with models of parenthood, yes, but all the more with models of good, true, reliable grown-up *people*. Living, abiding in covenant — whether God’s covenant with Israel, or the covenant of marriage, or the covenant between Jesus and his bride, the church — forms in us Anna and Joachim’s grounded integrity, and makes us mothers and fathers of the purity and integrity we exemplify to

our friends and neighbours. We are, as the ascending Jesus reminds his apostles, witnesses of all these things as our words and lives join with the voices of the faithful of Israel, saying, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ But no worries — in today’s affirmation of our covenants, there will be no need to bleach those pesky bloodstains from our finest robes.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit —

Amen