



Anglican Parish of St. Peter's Church,

Hackett's Cove, Nova Scotia

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Candlemas Sermon, 2 February 2020

"LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, / according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, / which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, / and to be the glory of thy people Israel. "

I

These words from our Gospel today will be familiar to many of us. The Office of Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer* includes the *Nunc Dimittis* – Simeon's words. Anglicans all over the world close the day with this beautiful prayer of hope finally realized.

The *Nunc Dimittis* is also often a part of our funeral liturgy – "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...." What could be more appropriate?

These are the words that the old man Simeon proclaims when he sees the long expected infant Jesus. Simeon had heard the Holy Spirit – and it called him to attend the Temple on the day that Jesus was presented. He had also been told that he would witness the Messiah in his lifetime – and what an amazing experience that must have been!

In the story of Jesus' life, Bethlehem is less than twenty kilometres south of Jerusalem, so this would have been a journey – but nowhere near the journey that Mary and Joseph had made from Nazareth, over 100 kilometres to the north. In fact, Jerusalem was on the way home to Nazareth!

It is perhaps confusing that we have already celebrated the Feast of Holy Innocents, and the flight into Egypt. But these, I think, would have come later. Remember that Herod ordered the

slaughter of all boys under two years, and after the Magi had “gone home by another route”. So Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, possibly with the toddler Jesus, returning with the child Jesus after Herod’s death. This is all still in the future.

Jesus’ next visit to the Temple will be as the pre-adolescent Jesus, celebrating his Bar-Mitzvah at around twelve or thirteen. This is when he engages with the priests and elders.

And later, he will come back again, and drive out the money-changers! Each visit makes him stronger and more assertive, and his voice louder.

Remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was the single focal point of the Jewish people, containing the Ark of the Covenant – the holy of holies. To make the trip into Jerusalem would be a sign of devotion – a pilgrimage. It is not obvious that every observant Jew in Judea would do this – but significant that Mary and Joseph did.

And while Simeon has become famous through the *Nunc Dimittis*, our Gospel also tells us of Anna, the daughter of Phanuel - a widow, a prophet, and a woman of great faith. She is described as more of a “Temple regular” – the better part of a lifetime spent in fasting and prayer. And she also recognizes Jesus!

(Unfortunately her words are not recorded, so we are left with Simeon’s. Chalk one up for the patriarchy! The women of the Bible are often under-represented.)

But both Simeon and Anna have waited their entire lives for this moment. Again, we don’t know what happened to Anna – but Simeon was satisfied that his life’s purpose had been filled. He was God’s witness. He didn’t live for himself – he lived to see the Divine become incarnate on earth.

So what will we do for Christ, when we consider his example?

II

In our Wednesday evening Bible study (and I encourage all of you to come along), we have begun our journey towards Lent by “Looking to the Saints & Martyrs” for examples of how to live our lives as Christians. On the first night one common trait became quickly apparent – the saints didn’t live for themselves. They didn’t place value in earthly things; they looked to the

kingdom by bearing Christ's burdens, carrying his cross and often sacrificing their lives as devout followers of Christ.

What will we do for Jesus?

Simeon, as old and frail as he was, could not die until he saw Christ. The same Holy Spirit who had asked Mary to carry Christ was asking him to be in the Temple to receive the divine.

III

This Sunday is also known as Candlemas, or the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. In some Anglican churches, all of the candles that will be used over the next year are blessed.

Our *Book of Common Prayer* still has an office for "Thanksgiving After Childbirth". This was a continuation of the tradition of "purification". In earlier days, women who had given birth would be "churched," usually within weeks of the birth, and before their babies were baptised.

This Sunday can be seen in many ways as the beginning of Christ's relationship with his church. He is recognized, his mother is purified and the candles are lit for him, with the sacrifice of two turtle doves!

But we no longer sacrifice animals, just as we no longer see women as needing "purification" after childbirth! The Divine has entered the temple, to make straight the way of the Lord. Things are not going to be the same.

Our Gospel ends with a rather prosaic observation that Mary, Joseph and Jesus "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord... returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

That is, interestingly, about all we hear about Christ's childhood within the canonical Gospels. But perhaps it is enough. Jesus grew up – but things were not the same.

Simeon also gives us some indication of the unrest that Jesus will cause, and perhaps the suffering that he will endure for all of his people. "the falling and the rising of many in Israel... and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Many Jewish people thought of the redemption of Jerusalem and God's people in terms of Jewish freedom from Roman rule, but some had a vision of an even greater redemption – a vision of spiritual renewal and salvation for all. “The light to lighten the Gentiles” - God's salvation is for all of us, if we only accept it. And, as we know, many people did not accept Christ and his teachings and salvation.

In our Old Testament reading, Malachi says: “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple”. Four hundred years before Simeon saw Jesus, Malachi knew this would happen.

How patient can we be, waiting for Jesus? In this age when we want all of the answers at the click of the button, let's not lose the mystery. This isn't a show for our entertainment; we aren't passive observers. If we are here for the right reasons we are here for Christ; and in any moment, we could become a Simeon, an Anna or like any other Saint called to carry out his mission here on earth. We are all his disciples – we are all his ministers!

IV

So this is why when we bring ourselves and our children to church for Baptism, we are offering ourselves, or our children, to live the life of God, just as Simeon and Anne did. We renounce the devil and all his works and dedicate ourselves, our souls and bodies. In Hebrews, we heard how:

“...through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.”

Every year, in Advent season, we await the coming of the baby Jesus. But then, we also wait – as Simeon waited – for his coming again in glory – for the Kingdom of Heaven. And we must wait patiently – as Simeon waited. And some day – whether in Heaven or on Earth – we will see God.

V

T.S. Eliot wrote, in his poem, *A Song for Simeon*:

“According to thy word,

They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation
With glory and derision,
Light upon light, mounting the saints' stair.
Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision.
Grant me thy peace.
(And a sword shall pierce thy heart,
Thine also).
I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
Let thy servant depart,
Having seen thy salvation.”

I think Eliot is suggesting that, in a way, Simeon makes his own sacrifice of departing in peace, to make way for the new. Christ's coming is joyous – but it requires a death, in order to experience the rebirth. This is a theme that occurs frequently in Eliot's religious poetry. And, as we move towards Lent and Easter, the nature of that sacrifice will be revealed.

We are told that God “...will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.”

Mary has brought more than two turtle-doves to the Temple this day. She has brought God's only begotten son – born into the House of David. What purer offering could there be? As we say, “all things come of thee – and of thine own have we given thee.”

But Simeon and Anna also remind us that we are never too old, weak or sick to make a difference. Our attitudes and behaviour will make a difference! Like Anna, if our hearts are open, God will guide us to share the story of Jesus with everyone we meet. Anna lived a difficult life – she had lost her husband and lived as a widow. But she knew her God when she saw him.

It takes faith to know a blessing from God. It is the joy of celebrating God's goodness in the midst of our chaotic, suffering world. Many of us may never be martyrs or saints, but by the grace of God we can depart in peace.

So, after we make our hearts clean, let us present ourselves at the steps of the Temple and accept his sacrifice for us!

Amen.