

Thought for the Week 27th December 2020

Luke 2: 22-32

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"^[a]), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."^[b]

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss^[c] your servant in peace.*

³⁰ *For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."*

A man was sleeping when his wife shook him and said, "Wake up, I think someone is breaking in!" The man had gone through this on many, many nights during the 20 years they had been married and he knew that the only way he would get any rest at all was to get out of bed and go and check it out.

This time, however, when he got to the bottom of the stairs, there was a man who had indeed broken in to rob the house. When he saw the householder, the thief was about to flee but the man said, "Hang on, wait a moment, you have to come with me and meet my wife." The very surprised thief said, "Why on earth would you want me to meet your wife?" The man replied, "Well, she's been expecting you for the past 20 years."

In our reading from Luke 2 today we came across someone who was waiting expectantly all of his life. His name was Simeon and as we consider what Luke records for us about him, and particularly his song of praise, we will see that, like him we have great reason to rejoice at this time.

Simeon's is one of four great songs of praise which are recorded in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. The best known is the Magnificat - Mary's song of joy when she was told that she was to be the mother of Jesus. The Nunc Dimittis, as it is sometimes known is the words of praise and adoration from Simeon when he realized that he had been privileged to see the Messiah, and so he could "depart in peace" as a happy man.

The story begins with Joseph and Mary making the six-mile journey up to Jerusalem from Bethlehem for the rite of purification. According to Old Testament law, a woman who gave birth was ritually, or ceremonially unclean and had to be purified by offering a sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. When

this was done, she was permitted once again to enter the Temple and worship in the local synagogue.

The second reason for their visit was to redeem the firstborn which according to the law belonged to God. The cost of this was five shekels – consisting of about 100 grams of pure silver. Joseph and Mary came to do this with an offering for sacrifice of two turtledoves or young pigeons. But as soon as they entered the Temple courts an unexpected thing happened. They were approached by an old man who took the baby from them and started to praise God.

We are told that Simeon was a good man who was devoted to praying to God, reading God's Word and meditating on it. The text says that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Him that he was not going to die until the Messiah had come. This was, of course, the great hope of everyone in Israel – that the Messiah would come in their day and generation but it was now many hundreds of years since the promise was made through the prophets.

We don't know when Simeon found out that he would see Messiah, or how long he had been waiting - it could have been months; it could have been years; it could even have been decades. Luke does not say what age Simeon was, but we tend to assume from his words – "*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word,*" that he was quite old.

Perhaps at times he wondered if the word he had received from the Lord was ever going to come true, but he was a patient man, and he continued to keep his focus on God's promise.

Simeon lived in very dark times, spiritually. True religion was at a very low ebb in Israel at this time – stuck in ritual and routine. Many people had given up hope in God. You know, we live in a time like that – a time when many people have given up hope in God. Millions of people in Britain have just been celebrating Christmas, without ever giving a thought to the Christ. Every year we hear that the numbers attending church are on the decline. We could easily give up hope.

It may seem like the church of Jesus is in decline and is being driven to the margins of society, but Jesus has promised us that he is building his church and that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Like Simeon of old we need to hold on to the promises of God and claim them for ourselves.

The second thing we see here is how in some way the Spirit of God moved Simeon to go to the Temple courts that particular day, but when he saw this very ordinary set of parents from a country village bring in their child to do what the custom of the Law required, his heart was stirred and he went over to them and took the child up in his arms and blessed God.

We don't know what Simeon had been looking for in his own mind. Perhaps he was expecting a king to come out of the sky. Or perhaps he was expecting a warrior to release them from Rome, but we do know that when Joseph and Mary showed up with Jesus, somehow he just knew that all that everyone had longed for had finally come.

We too have to trust in God to fulfil his promises in his way and in his time. There were many in Israel who were fed up waiting for God, so they took matters into their own hands. If God wasn't going to send a warrior-king messiah to drive out the hated Romans, then they would start a rebellion and drive them out. The roads out of Jerusalem were many a time lined with the crucified bodies of hundreds of these Zealots.

We must always resist the temptation to get ahead of God and organize his kingdom for him in the way in which we think it should go.

In contrast Simeon is content. He is content to let God do it in God's own way. He does not want to be in the forefront of a revival of religion in Israel. And so he says.

"Lord, now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

As he holds Jesus, he knows salvation has come even though it is strange to see it in a baby. How can one know the future of one so new and small?

But Simeon knows. This baby is the One through whom God would save His people.

As the hymnwriter puts it: "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform" – reflecting the words of God himself to Isaiah: (Isaiah 55:8-9)

(8) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So here stands Simeon holding Jesus in the gap between the old covenant and the new. All the promises that have been made by God are now being held in his arms. He is holding the promise. Here is salvation for all mankind...men, women and children. No one has to live in darkness anymore. Everyone can know the truth.

So, may this story encourage us all to-day to be like Simeon and LIVE IN ANTICIPATION OF JESUS.

Do you long for Jesus? Is tomorrow going to be that kind of day for you? As another New Year fast approaches, are you be looking for Jesus?

I also want to encourage you to adore Him. When Simeon took hold of that baby, he knew that all that he needed and all that the world needed had been satisfied. So again, I encourage you to recognize that in 2021 Jesus is all that you need. And that in our hearts and lives we will prepare room for Jesus so that, like Simeon of old, our hearts will overflow with joy.

And we have great reason to rejoice! WE HAVE A GOD WHO KEEPS HIS PROMISES.

Joy to the world the Lord has come!
let earth receive her king,
let every heart prepare him room
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing!

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness,
the wonders, wonders of his love.

Joy to the earth the saviour reigns!
let songs be heard on high,
while fields and streams and hills and plains
repeat, repeat the sounding joy

*Jubilate Hymns version of Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
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