

Reflection for Sunday 31st January 2021 (The Presentation of Christ in the Temple)

Bible reading:

Luke 2:22-40

In the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 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".

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 upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Reflection.

In today's gospel reading Simeon is described as someone who is 'awaiting the consolation of Israel'. We tend to think of that word consolation something second best, like a consolation prize or perhaps in a really bad situation when there is one small, good thing amongst the debris we might say 'Well at least that's some consolation'. But 'consolation' is a word that we've really devalued by using it in that way.

What 'consolation' means here could really be represented by words like 'comfort' in the sense of 'help' or 'rescue'.

For Simeon, the consolation of Israel would have meant freedom from the oppressive rule of the Romans, the Herod family and from the self-righteous religious leaders. It meant Israel being free to

be truly God's people and to be the source of blessing to every nation on earth – as God had promised to Abraham.

We don't know how long Simeon had been waiting, but we get the impression of a long time from those opening words 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace' or, as the Book of Common Prayer translates it 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'. This passage strikes a chord with me in our current situation. It seems that in this global pandemic, we've been waiting for consolation (in that sense of comfort, help and rescue) for almost a year now. Last year, at this point we had not yet understood the gravity of the situation. A couple of months later, we were hoping that the virus would recede in the summer and the worst would be over. Our 'consolation' seems to always been just out of reach. Plans that were made and postponed had to be put on hold again. We've become fed up with restrictions and sometimes our frustration has spilled out into our relationships with those around us.

So how did Simeon and Anna cope with all that waiting? How did they manage to live in the moment, knowing that consolation was coming but not knowing when?

I think it was because both of them were close to God in the here and now, not just focused on something in the future. Luke tells us, three times about the Holy Spirit and Simeon.

'the Holy Spirit was on him.'

'It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ'.

'Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts'.

He also tells us about Anna, that she 'She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying'.

Simeon and Anna were waiting but they were also sticking close to God in the moment; every moment. Simeon was led by God to go to the temple courts on the right day at the right time to encounter Jesus. That is the kind of closeness that God wants to have with each of us. If we look for him, we will see God at work every day in our lives and the lives of those around us.

In Evening Prayer each in churches all over the UK and other countries, the words of Simeon are said or sung as the Nunc Dimittis (literally 'Now you dismiss). I used to think it was strange that these words, that were once in a lifetime words for Simeon, have become every day words in our worship. But I have come to think that, if I understand them as being about seeing and recognising Jesus in the moment – right here and now, then they are appropriate for every day.

Our consolation will come. As we wait for it, perhaps a phrase like 'Look to the future but stay close to Jesus in the present' would be a good maxim.

Jonathan.