

*dismissed!*  
 a sermon preached on the  
*feast of candlemas:*  
*the presentation of Christ in the temple*  
 2 February 2014  
 at  
*st john's*  
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
 by *fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

Many generations of faithful Anglicans have been nurtured by Simeon's song. Sung, or said, at evensong in a thousand thousand Anglican parish churches for, perhaps, 400 years – as the light of day is fading, or has slipped away altogether. Sung or recited at funerals – poignantly, as the coffin is lowered into the earth – or perhaps at bedside in preparation for death.

It seems unlikely to me that this beautiful canticle we call the Nunc Dimittis would find its way to the centre of worship in prosperity doctrine religion. Its tone is simply insufficiently 'up beat'. But it's a mark of the spiritual depth which Anglicanism has managed to retain that the Nunc Dimittis has been so central in our tradition – and which we will pray together at this feast's sending rite. Here it is in its *A Prayer Book for Australia* rendering (now relegated to Tuesday Evening Prayer):

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace:  
 your word has been fulfilled.  
 My own eyes have seen the salvation:  
 which you have prepared in the sight of every people:  
 A light to reveal you to the nations:  
 and the glory of your people Israel.<sup>1</sup>

It is not merely the 2000-year-old eyes of Simeon, however, which have seen. And Simeon does not so much prove something about the 2000-year-old Jesus – that would be to lose the gospel's lively revelation to concrete historicism. 'My eyes have seen the salvation'. This either expresses a universal human experience, or it is nothing more than a lifeless trophy in a spiritual taxidermist's cabinet. This song isn't really Simeon's song at all. It is every person's song – sung as some old aspect of ourselves is lowered into the earth for transformation.

For we also do see. Our eyes do have revealed to them the mystery. At least, I suppose it should be added that our eyes are capable of seeing that the mystery of the Christmas crib is not merely about Jesus. The mystery – which is the light for every people, all nations – cannot be the preserve of special individuals. This would be to undo Incarnation! Every person is given glimpses of this light. This is God's grace, God's universal outpouring of love. Learning to see, of course, is that for which the individual must take responsibility.

It may be assumed that Simeon's prayer is the voice of an old man at the end of a long life. Actually, the text does not tell us anything about Simeon's age – only that he was "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel".<sup>2</sup> It is possible, perhaps, that it's a case of assumption based on Anna's age, which is given.<sup>3</sup> It is revealed to Simeon that he will not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah.<sup>4</sup> But it need not be assumed that this is necessarily a reference to Simeon's literal, physical death. Rather, it may just as readily allude to another death – an inner death, of an old dispensation, an old attitude or way. Spiritually speaking, this is more immediately pertinent.

And when the divine mystery is revealed in the new-born arising, Simeon's prayer models the necessary response: "Now you are dismissing your servant in peace".<sup>5</sup> Dismissing. It is one thing to see – quite another to accept that the revelation means that something is to 'be dismissed', to be laid to rest in the ground.

<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:29-32, as it appears in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p400.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:25

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:36-37

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:26

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:29 NRSV

In this prayerful moment Simeon foreshadows the Christ – who, having seen God’s glory, accepts that an old dispensation must die. As itinerant preacher and healer, Jesus bears the projection of the hopes and aspirations of Israel. But having seen God’s glory, through his own testing, Jesus recognises that this old Messiah projection must die – for it belongs to an earlier stage of development, which though it served perfectly well until then, is in fact caught in the old cycle of violence, nationalism, xenophobia, and triumphalism. Christ’s willingness to accept the death of the projection – which is his sacrifice on the cross – constitutes the astonishing spiritual breakthrough, the quantum leap forward and upward in the evolution of human consciousness. And, “because Christ himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested”.<sup>6</sup>

For if we do not accept the death of an old dispensation – even though it may have served us perfectly well until now – then the revelation of God’s glory is in vain. It is not only Mary who is ‘purified’ – the inner thoughts of the hearts of ‘many’ will be revealed; every soul is pierced,<sup>7</sup> all need to be presented at the inner temple.

Thus, though the manner and the detail vary widely, of course, to every one of us who is willing to attend is revealed the divine glory - the possibility of unexpected spiritual breakthrough, a quantum leap in human consciousness. This is the universal divine gift. And Simeon’s prayer models for us the necessary attitude.

Moreover, like the forty day old infant Simeon holds, the saving development which arises from this death is seemingly insignificant – hidden from the masses, not in the media, out of sight, fragile, vulnerable, against a backdrop of loud, clamorous, pushy, insecure, at-times violent messianic aspirations. Like Simeon we, too, hold a fragile thing – our own seemingly insignificant souls. And it requires a ‘devout’ commitment to holding this infant development within us – even when we might doubt its usefulness or strength.

Like today’s candlelight procession, this is a solemn yet joyful movement of the heart and mind as one. Crucially, the mind serving the heart – a song, a dance, a procession, the reverent holding of frail and vulnerable flesh.

Thus, at this place of birth and rebirth, with Simeon we are invited to the dance of death and birth – to throw our lot in with the mystery of death and resurrection, the mystery we touch in the waters of the font as we are dismissed by our new deacon at the end of this Christmas-Epiphany season.

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 2:18

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:35