

Park Road Baptist Church 17th January 2021

Luke 2. 22-38: Simeon.

Today's New Testament reading tells of the infant Jesus being presented to God in the Temple in Jerusalem. As the first-born male of the family, this was required by the Law (Lev. 12. 2-5) in commemoration of the escape from Egypt under Moses and Aaron (Ex. 13). Our passage is found in the so-called infancy narratives that open Luke's Gospel. These two chapters seem to act as a preface to the main narrative of the Gospel, which begins, as does Matthew, with the genealogy and, as do all four Gospels, with John the Baptist. There is a different feel to these stories from the rest of the Gospel. They are suffused with a sense of Jewish piety. Joseph and Mary keep strictly to the Law. Events cluster round the Temple, from Zechariah the priest to the trips down from Nazareth. Then there are the hymns interspersing the narrative. Perhaps what we have here are local memories that Luke collected when in Jerusalem with the captive Paul! In any case it is as though Luke is describing a time of transition, moving out of the old (though not disowning it) into the time when, under John the Baptist, Jesus enters into his ministry, when the real story begins.

Joseph and Mary, therefore, with the infant, make their way to the Temple. There the family encounter Simeon and Anna, two devout and faithful souls, awaiting patiently for the fulfilment of the promised coming of the Messiah, when all Israel's woes would be ended. William Barclay refers to them as representative of 'the Quiet in the Land'; who, in contrast to the warrior leaders of rebellion, sought to await God's move in quiet contemplation and prayer. Indeed, Simeon has been assured that he would himself see the Messiah. There had been many false dawns. About a hundred and fifty years before, the Maccabees had actually broken the Seleucid power of Antiochus Epiphanes, but the new state had quickly collapsed in fractious conflict. Now the Romans strutted the streets of Jerusalem, themselves only marginally less oppressive than the corrupt viciousness of the Herodian kings. The nation was divided. Zealot uprisings were regularly put down. The rest were divided between sullen acquiescence, passive resistance, and Quisling complicity. So, Simeon and Anna were waiting, waiting for God to 'redeem his people'. Despite of everything they had sustained their expectation.

The waiting, however, continues. This is precisely the situation in which we still find ourselves. The second volume of Luke's narrative, the Acts of the Apostles,

begins with the risen Christ ascending into Heaven, leaving behind bemused and anxious disciples. 'Lord,' they ask, 'is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?' The response was: 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set.' (Acts 1. 6-7) All that they were given by the attendant men in white was that 'this same Jesus will come'. (Acts 1. 11) The completion was not yet. It has to be awaited. And this is a theme that runs through the whole of the New Testament, perhaps most poignantly expressed in Revelation, where the cry goes up from the martyrs and the persecuted Church: 'How long will it be' (Rev. 6. 10) How long, O Lord, how long! And so it has continued down the history of the Church.

And, today, at a time of considerable stress and anxiety and threat, there should be no surprise if, even silently, the cry for relief continues to go up. Not only are there the restrictions and disciplines of living with the ever-present threat of Corona virus, but the uncertain future of living post-Brexit, and the ominous consequences of climate change and environmental degradation. Refugees wander the earth or are found in vast camps that become the only place they know. Injustice and violence are rampant. People lash out in desperation and others cry out for relief.

It can also be very personal. Things cherished and, perhaps, devotedly worked for, investments of time and energy, collapse and disappear, withering on the vine. Was it all worth it? Or, may be, we carry personal burdens that have at times seemed too much to bear, from which we have sought relief, longing for release? Or, again, there is a grievous loss and an emptiness that never seems to go away. Surely, at some time or another, our hearts have echoed the cry: 'How long, O Lord, how long!'

In the book of Proverbs (13. 12) we read: 'Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick'. To have one's hopes raised and dashed, time and again, can make one depressed and angry. Constantly to battle to survive so easily produces despair and bitterness. If there always seems to be an impassable barrier or a glass ceiling; if the grass always grows greener on the other side of the fence, frustration and anger are aroused. Resignation can take over, a downward slippery slope. This is understandable, part of human nature. Yet it is ultimately destructive. However, it is made worse if, as in our affluent Western culture, instant gratification is the order of the day; if the waiting must be taken out of wanting; have now pay later; make it so that it never happens again; we should not need to live in uncertainty.

If God, too, seems absent or hidden then the light can grow dim and the heart grow cold, as echoed in the words of William Cowper, friend on John Newton, one of whose hymns preceded the readings:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I knew the Lord?
Where is the soul refreshing view
Of Jesus and his word?

Is God really on our side, or do we wait in vain?

There is, however, another story to be told, a glimpse of which we can catch even in the challenges and chances of life in this world. Tragedy or danger can also elicit dedication, compassion, commitment. We have seen this as one of the responses to the Coronavirus epidemic: stories of generosity and heroism. Men and women do rise up to meet the challenge of a broken and unjust world. This other way is not easy but more reliable, worthwhile and, in the end, rewarding. There is a remarkable passage in Paul's letter to the Romans (5. 1-5):

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have attained access to the grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

Here hope is the end product of waiting, for the process of endurance can be creative. Out of postponement can come patient hope, with faith, which is trust, so that love can enter in and fill our hearts. This is not simple resignation; nor seeking hardship for its own sake. Rather it is a firm grasp of reality seen in and under the perspective of God's love. There are two marks of this hope: first, the love of God and faith in him undergirds and is at the core of our existence, relativising all else, casting all other considerations into the shadows; and, secondly, we, if only we expect and look, also can catch glimpses of this fundamental reality shining in and through the darkness.

This brings us back to Simeon. He and Anna had been waiting long in hope. It must have run thin at times. One wonders, however, what drew him to the strangers from Galilee in all the hustle and bustle of the Temple court! Perhaps Simeon had the gift of discernment, honed by years of meditation on Scripture and prayer. Perhaps a wistfulness shone out from the Holy Family. Perhaps he was drawn by some inward but inexplicable movement of the Spirit. We can

never know, but in this child, a babe in arms, he caught a glimpse of God's saving action, the dawn of a new day. Here was the answer to the ancient prayer, which he must have often prayed, found in Psalm 27. In the face of a whole heap of trouble the Psalmist trusts God:

One thing I asked of the Lord,
That will I seek after,
To live in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life;
To behold the beauty of the Lord And to enquire in his Temple.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
In the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord,
Be strong, and let your heart take courage;
Wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27. 4, 12-13)

Simeon's response to the Christ child was twofold. First, he acknowledged the mystery of this revelation, expressed in the familiar words of the *Nunc Dimitis*: 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation' (Luke 2. 29-30) He was satisfied. God had granted him his heart's desire. It may not be the end of the story, but it is enough. Yet, secondly, there was still a mystery. This not the Messiah he had expected, for, as he told Mary, this child would bring judgement and hope, but it would be through suffering, suffering that would bring anguish and raise questions. This was a strange, obscure fulfilment, taking the form of a violent death, recalled by Hilaire Belloc:

They crucified him on Calvary
Upon an April's day;
And because he was her little Son
She followed him all the way.
Our Lady stood beside the cross,
A little space apart,
And when she heard our Lord cry out
A sword went through her heart.

So, at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we have the paradox of the Kingdom of God; a Kingdom that has come as we welcome the King; but also a Kingdom that has not yet arrived, for which we have to wait with patience; a Kingdom that lies hidden behind and under the kingdoms of this world; but which is found in the reality of the hope that is seen in the face of Jesus, the man from Nazareth. So too, with Simeon, we can see the signs and glimpses of the

Kingdom, the presence of Christ in his Spirit, signs found among us and around us, within us, in everyday times and places and on the broader stage of society, often fleeting, sometimes elusive, sometimes greeted widely, often unrecognised. Let these glimpses of salvation strengthen patience and hope – signs of ‘the consolation of Israel’.

A final note. In my college chapel, at Evensong before dinner, which I attended fairly regularly, the Song of Simeon was appropriately repeated after the New Testament reading, after hearing again something of the Gospel.

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.

The words of Simeon have rightly been incorporated into the Church’s worship down the centuries, almost certainly from Luke’s time itself. So familiar that they become embedded in and inform one’s very being. At eventide, to repeat them, also underlined the fact that God had been there through the day. Perhaps there had been moments when his presence was especially real; more likely one had been too busy, too engrossed, too careless to remember God’s presence; but here we are brought back to basics. Each and every day, ordinary as it may have been, God was and is present, his grace at work. So, it was possible to be at peace. And, even today, so many years after, when there is cause to be grateful for God’s goodness, these are the words that spring to mind; and through them to express thanks and receive his grace. In this testing time and wherever you are placed, take them and pray thankfully with Simeon, ‘Mine eyes have seen thy salvation’.