

## Reflection for Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2023

### Luke2, vs22-40

Our Gospel reading today; the story of the infant Jesus and the elderly folk Simeon and Anna is quite extraordinary; a fact which may escape us because it is so well known. Is it a 'true fact', as my daughter used to ask when young, to query one of her father's more dubious flights of fancy? **Or**, is it a story, part of Luke's gathering together of tales in circulation among the first two generations of Christians to re-assure them that Jesus' mission on earth included all peoples, gentile and Jew alike? This the promise foretold by the Prophet Malachi, which formed our Old Testament reading this morning

*Mal. 2 Verse3*

*I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his Temple, the messenger of the Covenant, whom you desire will come, says the Lord Almighty.*

This message was explicit in the nature of Jesus, the Christ, from his very beginnings as a baby being presented in the Temple, and this could be recognised and acknowledged by both Simeon and Anna.

Luke had to start his narrative knowing that his audience was at least 90% illiterate. As Greek speaking gentiles were unlikely to have knowledge of Jewish history and tradition available to Jewish Christians, upon which both Matthew and Mark could build the case of the Christ being a logical fulfilment of God's covenant with the Hebrew people. We have no other source for comparison, so we never can know whether this story is historical fact or whether it is as we say in Scotland 'a gye guid tale'. Personally, I am not sure that the distinction actually matters, or would have mattered to those hearing the story nearly over years ago. Nothing gets into the New Testament canon without it having several clear and relevant moral points, illustrated by an easily remembered tale. It is at worst a parable comparable to those that Jesus himself told to illustrate his teachings.

What it does have is both emotional integrity and internal consistency. Moreover, the passage contains one of the two earliest Hymns of praise to God in our

Christian tradition, known as the ***Nunc Dimittis***. The other is Mary's song known to us as the ***Magnificat***. They were verse designed to be chanted or sung, and across 2,000 years have been heard in many settings; in the Western tradition everything from Gregorian chant, through Polyphony to Taizé. The very fact of being sung makes them easier to remember by illiterate Christians; the majority for most of the first 1500 years of the Christian Church. The key thing in both these hymns is that intense emotion, almost ecstasy, is expressed. This intense emotion often gets lost in written 'modern translations'. The text as translated inclines to the workaday and prosaic and lacks rhyme or rhythm. I feel strongly that this detracts from the impact, which the ***Nunc Dimittis*** ought to have. In our episcopal (or if you prefer it our Anglican tradition) it is one of the centrepieces of the Liturgy for Evensong, the ending of the day when one's actions need to be reconciled before the hoped for peace of night and quiet sleep. (The addition of Compline to the monastic vespers is a fairly modern innovation)

The whole passage contains a number of elements some of which I would like to pursue a little, before this reflection becomes a rant about translation and singing. It seems to me that at one level the passage is about the beginning and ending of life, and that its message is of direct relevance to myself, who is within striking distance of the suggested ages of Simeon and Anna. As one of my less sympathetic friends put it. You are now at full-time in the match of life and moving into extra time. However, it has not yet got to the penalty shoot-out!

Old Simeon for so long and through all life's ups and downs had held fast to the promises made both to Israel, as chronicled in the Malachi reading, and by God directly to himself, that he would not die until he had seen the promised Christ. He had lived in both the hope and faith that God's promise would happen. Is it not remarkable that he clearly recognised the Christ in a two-month-old babe? He also recognised that in line with the historic prophets and leaders of Israel that his life was likely to be turbulent, possibly violent and would bring great heartache to his family and those who followed him. These points were reiterated in Anna's intervention.

Let us return to Simeon himself and his mental condition. He knew that his time on this earth was ending and was only awaiting 'The consolation of Israel' in the shape of the infant Jesus, as the text tells us. For Simeon the goal, he was waiting

for, had happened and he could now be content let go, whenever the summons came. There have been many Candlemas sermons preached on the subject of **letting go**, which I do not intend to plagiarise. I fully understand what this is about, uncomfortable as it is personally, and something I could not have talked about a year ago. I have become aware over these last years that in many cases the person dying often seeks the permission of the living to finally let go and be quit of the pain of living onwards. It is a wrench this detachment from life, but a necessary part of the process, and it is the ultimate betrayal of life-long love to withhold that permission. May I just interject at this stage that many, perhaps most deaths are not like this:- a process, but are abrupt and unprepared for calamities... a bolt from the blue. Making sense of these I suspect is even more difficult for those left behind. I am not making comparisons.

Letting go is also something that we all have to do at various points in our passage through life. It implies and requires above all trust and hope, whether it is encouraging children to a healthy independence, and applies particularly to children becoming adult. Mostly it involves standing back and letting them make their own mistakes, but being ready to help when needed. It is what we do when we are fulfilled and have a sense of wholeness within ourselves. It is inner calm, which puts everything in perspective, calms anxiety, and encourages us to let go of things that do not matter so much. It also allows us to treasure those things that do matter across life, love, family, and friends and provides a solid platform from which we can meet the world, whatever that may bring.

Finally having sung the Nunc Dimittis in many forms over the years I would like to finish with my favourite setting of the words in English, sung by my current favourite **a capella** group.

(Orlando Gibbons, Voces8) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwyqJoTmPCM>

You may prefer the Taize version

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRjSiduxioM>

It may be a personal weakness but I do believe beauty, which is also created by God has its place alongside clarity.

Amen

**Alan Cameron**