

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2020 - 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas - Year B

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There seems to be a bit of a contradiction in today's Gospel passage - actually, quite a large one - and the question is, after all the candlelight and joy and presents and everything else that went along with our Christmas celebrations on Friday, what in the world are we doing talking about death. After all, Luke's account of Simeon's troubling song is simply haunted by the specter of death.

Along side the other Christmas carols we'll sing, such as "Joy to the World" that we began with today, this song sounds odd, even dissonant. So, let me ask it once again: what's all this talk about death doing in the middle of our celebration of life?

...But maybe we should back up a bit.

In St. Luke's account, it is now forty days after Jesus' birth. After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law. Now, thirty-two days later, his parents are again performing their duty as pious Jews by returning to the Temple, this time in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord.

Suddenly, the situation takes a turn as an old man comes forward out of the shadows to scoop up their child into his arms and prophesy about him. Startled at first, perhaps, even a bit frightened by the old man's ecstatic face, Mary and Joseph yield to him because they sense the Lord's Spirit upon him. Hearing Simeon's prophecy, they are reminded of the events of the previous weeks and months when angels and shepherds had intruded into their lives to foretell the greatness of their Son.

How puzzled they must have been, though, at what we now call Simeon's "song": "Lord now let your servant go in peace." The words, I'm fairly sure, are familiar to you. You may know them better as the *Nunc Dimittis*, Latin for "now send away," the hymn always sung at Evensong. Expressing Simeon's pious thanksgiving to God for the Christ child and his earnest plea for peace, his song has become one of the most familiar and beautiful hymns of that liturgy.

And yet each time I hear these words, I grow strangely uncomfortable. Listen to them again. "Lord, now 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." Beautiful words, to be sure, but also troubling, for let's not kid ourselves, when Simeon asks that he be allowed to go, he's asking to die.

And so I wonder, why does Luke record this strange scene and song. Why would he move from the beauty and light and joy of the nativity straight to Simeon's morbid request for death? And why must we focus on that request, and therefore on death, just a couple of days after our own celebrations of Christmas.

Partly, perhaps, it is because we must accept that death is as much a part of life as anything else - and as Christians it is not something to be feared, especially. So Simeon reminds us that he, like us, lives with it everyday.

But here take note. This is more than merely stark realism. For St. Luke is clear that Simeon is able to speak of death so honestly only in the light of the coming of the promised messiah, only, that is, by the confidence that in this helpless child God has come to redeem Israel and save all the world.

"Lord," Simeon, sings, "now you can let your servant go in peace; for your word has been fulfilled." Simeon perceives, you see, that in the Christ-child God has kept

God's promises; that in this babe, set for the rising and fall of many, God has acted once and for all to address the question and specter of death with the promise of life.

And so Simeon does not *ask* for death; rather, he accepts it courageously and confidently in the light of God's promised salvation. And he does so, again, only upon seeing and holding God's promise in his hands, only after touching and feeling the promise of life which God granted to him through Christ... and which God grants also to us.

This, then, is why we sing Simeon's song, for as darkness overtakes the world, be it the darkness of evening or death, we commend ourselves, all of our lives, and our loved ones to the God made known through the manger and cross, the God who has promised us life eternal in Holy Baptism. Anchored by this promise we can go to our night's rest in confidence and entrust even our beloved to the God we know in Jesus.

And so we continue singing Simeon's song, all these many years after the events St. Luke records, simply because it tells of God's great love for us, a love that even death cannot destroy. For, like Simeon, we also need to hear and see and touch and feel God's promise, the promise that God will be with us and for us forever, the promise announced in the birth of that innocent babe.

For this reason, what I wish for you on this day and in the days to come isn't simply a "merry" Christmas, but also a "blessed" one; a Christmas, that is, so infused by God's promise of presence and peace that you can leave worship to go out into the world with confidence, neither denying the harsh realities of this life nor being deterred by them, but rather facing whatever comes your way in the coming week and year with courage. For you are God's beloved child, and it was for your sake that Christ was born!

And suddenly, this side of Christmas, Simeon's odd and courageous carol is also now our own: "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled"...for Christ the savior is born! Blessed Christmas, one and all!

Amen