



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 31st December 2023

Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday after Christmas

A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:32)

I want to speak for a few moments this morning about Simeon and his song. The *Nunc Dimittis* has always been my favourite New Testament canticle and, when I looked at the lectionary lessons for today, I realised that I had never preached about it. You know that I am in no sense a professional biblical scholar; I speak simply as a historian with access to the normal books any ministers might have on their shelves. I am particularly indebted to the volumes by Raymond Brown, the Catholic biblical scholar, on *The Birth of the Messiah* (*New Anchor Bible*, Doubleday, New York 1977 & 1994), which is a rare example of a commentary specifically on what we call in English 'the infancy narratives'. Its second edition added nearly 300 pages to the first, representing new scholarship between 1976 and 1993.

I expect you will all know that the death and resurrection of Jesus were celebrated by Christians from the earliest times, whereas Christmas was only celebrated from the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine around 336 AD, who, with his mother, had a particular interest in the Holy Land. Together they had initiated the building of the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem about ten years earlier.

I shall try to answer two questions: what is the significance of the story (or stories) of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple? and what is its significance for us today? First, what is the significance of the Presentation of Jesus? Basically, as with other references to Jewish customs, it is to show that Jesus was brought up as any orthodox Jew would have been. This is so obvious to us that we take it for granted; but in view of the separation of the Church from the Jews by the end of the first century, and their separate development subsequently, it was something that tended to be overlooked by the early medieval Church. But the closing words of the *Nunc Dimittis* that are my text hold the two aspects together: 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and ... the glory of thy people Israel'.

Who then was the Simeon, who spoke these words? We know little more than Luke tells us: 'a man who lived in Jerusalem, righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, on whom the Holy Spirit rested, who had been promised that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah'. The phrase 'consolation of Israel' is interesting. It has been the standard English translation since Tyndale's Bible and the Geneva Bible in the sixteenth century. But the Greek word it translates is also found in the description of Joseph of Arimathea, in whose tomb Jesus was buried, (Lk 23:51), where equally consistently it is translated 'kingdom of God'. Note again, referring to my text, that we have both the glory of Israel - the closest we come to the theme of the chosen people - and a light to the Gentiles, or a widening of those who shall participate in the salvation given by God. This justifies the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles, which Paul is depicted as beginning in Acts. Whereas most of the imagery in these opening chapters is drawn from Isaiah, it also draws on little-remarked-upon verses in the prophecy of Zechariah, upon whose instructions the Second Temple had been built after the Exile (Zech 2:10-11), but gives them a different twist. In Zechariah 'the coasts and islands of the nations' (=Gentiles) are presented as being *made* to bow down to the Lord. In Simeon's oracle the Gentiles are drawn to recognise the true God through being enlightened by the Gospel. The imagery of light and seeing predominates throughout, which is also echoed in the opening verses of John's Gospel.

You can see how the simple imagery of the *Nunc Dimittis* lends itself to various legendary additions. Some of these, such as the idea that Simeon died after this encounter, seem implausible on the grounds of internal consistency alone. Others are more subtle and more recent. Take, for example, T.S Eliot's poem *A Song for Simeon*.

*At this point in the service, I read T.S Eliot's poem aloud. For copyright reasons it is not practical to include the whole text in anything which a reader can print out. It is readily accessible on the internet, using any of the standard search engines, and I urge readers to look at it. It may also be found in the original edition of **Ariel Poems**, published in 1928, and in other collections of Eliot's poetry, most obviously in **The Complete Poems and Plays of T S Eliot**, published in 1969 and further editions, by Faber & Faber, pp 105-106.*

The poem, written in 1928, is a staging post in Eliot's journey from the liberal unitarianism of his youth to the high church Anglicanism that culminated in *Four Quartets*. Published in the same volume as the better-known *Journey of the Magi*, it offers a sober and realistic view of what this different Messiah was offering. It emphasises the fact that Simeon was at the end of his life, even if it does not go as far as to assume that he died immediately after seeing the infant Jesus. In evoking images from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in AD 70, it has a strangely contemporary ring to it. For Eliot, Simeon is a man who has fulfilled all the duties of the Mosaic Law but does not expect to be spared from the coming desolation. It is the Infant, 'the still unspoken and unspoken Word', to whom he appeals to grant Israel's consolation: the baby, impassive now perhaps, but in the future the central figure of what we still call the Passion, the sword that will pierce Mary's heart. The 'stations of the mountain of desolation' may be understood as the stations of the Cross. In view of the images that dominate our television screens just now we may find the words 'thy people Israel' difficult to say; but they do not refer to the modern state of Israel, which is only seventy years old. They refer to the link drawn by the Old Testament writers, and Isaiah in particular, between God's self-revelation to the descendants of Jacob and the destiny of all nations. They also remind us that the New Testament declares that God's blessing is not primarily a reward for good behaviour; that is one of the unfortunate legacies of puritan theology.

For the Gospel-writers the Infancy narratives are intended to emphasise that Jesus was really human yet was also God; for Luke, the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, and the *Nunc Dimittis* are intended to 'flesh out' (if you will forgive the pun) the doctrinal affirmations that accompany the Death and Resurrection.

What then does the *Nunc Dimittis* mean for us today? First and foremost, it is an indispensable part of the tradition of the Church's worship. Taken with the second oracle, the word about the sword that will pierce Mary's heart, it brings the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus into the centre of the Christmas story. Finally, when taken with the other Lukan oracles, it is a reminder of how much of the work that Jesus began still remains to be accomplished. Poverty and homelessness, violence and warfare are still very much on our contemporary agenda. There is much still to be done as we enter a new year. Perhaps most of all, as we wait for the light to return, Simeon and Anna remind us of the centrality of prayer.

DMT, 31 December 2023