

Lord, let your servant depart in peace...Luke 2.22-40

This scene in the Temple, from the gospel of Luke (2.22-40) is perhaps the only one in the Bible in which we find depicted human life across three generations: the young parents Mary and Joseph present their infant Son in the Temple, and looking on with joy and delight we find Simeon and Anna...not the child's 'real' grandparents.. but certainly 'nonni' in terms of their age, their experiences and their perspective on life.

It is not by chance that the evangelist Luke gathers the generations in one place, in the temple of God. One of the aspects of this story is the handing on to the new generations the story of God's love, God's providence. It is the handing on of faith in God's covenant, of God's promise to be with his people.

We can imagine the tender love with which Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn son to the Temple; their anxiety for his health, his safety and his future; their desire to be good parents and to be worthy of the task they have been given for his nurture and his growth. We can imagine their surprise when they meet these *nonni* who suddenly appears out of nowhere: Simeon, who takes the child in his arms, and the elderly Anna, who pops out of the shadows to begin praising God in a loud voice.

What was a simple ritual to fulfill the law of Moses has become for this young family something both strange and momentous. A simple family occasion becomes an earth-shattering revelation of the presence of God.

Here we find more than just the handing of the message of God's love and care for God's chosen people Israel. The announcement of Simeon: 'Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation' proclaims to the world that the presence of God, the promise and covenant of God with the Jewish people, is being handed on and given as a gift to the whole world.

'You are dismissing your servant in peace.' --- Simeon's words are almost like a great sigh—a great sigh of relief, of contentment. He had lived with the hope and longing for the freedom of his people, for the justice of God for his family and for his community, he had lived in hope and longing for an end to the suffering and bitterness of their oppression. Simeon, through the Holy Spirit, is granted that gift of being able to recognize the presence of God in this infant Jesus.

As the prophet Malachi (3.1-5) says in our Old Testament reading: 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple.'

And here he is, an infant, just 40 days old.

Simeon's words are a true acclamation of faith. What could he really know about how Jesus's life would unfold? How could he imagine, as he gazes on this baby, the healing, the teaching, the preaching, the dramatic challenges to the status quo. Simeon didn't know any of all that. He wasn't granted the gift of seeing the events of the future. He was simply given the gift of recognizing the presence of God. And it was this recognition of God in the Christ-child which filled Simeon with peace.

He could let go---let go of his anxiety for himself and for his people, let go of his fear of the future and his sadness for the present. He could let go of his disappointments of his past and simply allow his life to be held in the love of God's presence. As Simeon takes the child in his arms and blesses him, Simeon himself is held in the loving arms of God and blessed.

Simeon knows that the future of this child and of his mother will be a rocky road, and yet, he is filled with joy, his heart is full of blessing which overflows, and which he desires to share with this young family. His mind and heart and body find that relaxation of true peace, of the true faith that indeed all will be well because God is present.

Here is a lesson for us. Just as Mary and Joseph are willing to hand over their child into the arms of this complete stranger--willing to receive his blessing, and willing for him to know the joy and delight of holding this infant,-- so too they are willing to hand Jesus over to us.

We too are invited to hold the Christ child, to look with awe and delight on this infant. We are invited, like Simeon, to look for the presence of God, and to feel ourselves to be held in the love of God, to feel for ourselves that sense of peace that indeed all will be well simply because God is present.

Like Simeon, we are invited to lay down any bitterness of the past, to let go of our fear of the future, and to shift our focus from the sadness of the present to the light and hope of Christ.

This is a lesson for us as individuals as we make our way through life, which is at times uncertain, at times painful, at times joyful, and always full of surprises. This is a lesson for us as nations and peoples. Our forebears, our grandparents, whether real or metaphorical, worked and lived by values which they desired to pass on to their children and grandchildren. We accept those values, always examining them in the light of Christ and measuring them against the values of God's kingdom. We accept those values inasmuch as they bring glory to God through their inclusiveness and their openness to the whole of his people.

As we examine our past, looking in these days and weeks at the past of Europe, the tragedy of the hatred and anti-semitism of the second world war, we remember the desire to build peace and to live in harmony with others. We give thanks for the work done to try to create a better place for the next generations. As we look back on the past and the events of recent years, we pray that we may do so not with bitterness and anger, but with a desire to acknowledge our mistakes and to own our responsibilities.

As we look to our future--so uncertain, so different from what we had imagined a few years ago-- we are invited to do so without fear, with an eye to the good of others, and with a desire to bring nations together in peace.

As we live our present moment, we pray that we may know the peace of Christ, and that we may be given the gift of recognizing the presence of God with us, God for us, God within us.

Gracious God,
help us to recognize our presence among us.

Sweeten the bitterness of our regrets, open our hearts to your forgiving love, free us from fear of our future. By your Holy Spirit, may your love and peace flow in us and through us.

We make our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our salvation, our peace, our brother and our friend. Amen.

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Vickie Sims, Sunday 2nd February 2020, 10.30 am Eucharist. All Saints' Anglican Church, Milan.