

Simeon's Song

Luke 2:21-40; Isaiah 43:1-7

8 & 10 January 2010

All Saints Cathedral, Cairo

INTRO

In our home, the Christmas season is now officially over. The green and rather large plastic excuse for a Christmas tree will go back in its box, all decorations are shelved again, and we move on with life into the New Year. What will the year 2010 have in store for us?

We have read the story of Joseph and Mary who came into the temple with their little baby, Jesus. For them, this was *also* a time of closure. *Their* Christmas season was almost over, and it was time to look forward. What would their future look like? What would the future hold for their child, Jesus?

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

Five times in the passage that we have read the word 'law', referring to the Hebrew laws of Moses, is used. From the beginning of his life, even when

he was still *unaware* of it, Jesus was subjected to all the laws of God, thanks to Joseph and Mary, two very upright people.

When our Lord was eight days old, he was circumcised, in accordance with Jewish law.

And now, 40 days after his birth, again in accordance with Jewish law, he was brought into the temple.

Joseph and Mary had gone to the temple for *two* reasons. *One* reason was, that Mary had to become ritually clean. In Israel, a woman was considered impure for 40 days after bearing a son. This meant that she could not properly worship God in his temple.

For her ritual cleansing, Mary brought with her two doves, or pigeons, as prescribed in the laws of Moses for people who could not afford a lamb. A priest would kill those pigeons, sprinkle some of the blood of

those pigeons over Mary, and officially declare her clean.

These laws reminded the nation of Israel, and us, that all human beings, even when they are as religious as the mother of our Lord, are in need of being made clean. We are unclean compared to our holy God.

Joseph and Mary had *also* come to the temple for consecrating Jesus. All parents had to do this for their *firstborn* son. They had to pay five silver shekels, to *redeem* that first boy, in accordance with Israel's religious laws.

What was the meaning of this redemption of the firstborn son?

God wanted his whole nation to be a priesthood; all men and women were expected to live for him, not just the Levites that were called to perform the duties in the temple.

If you were a boy, born in the tribe of Levi, and you happened to be the oldest son, then you were to serve as a priest in the temple.

But in order to impress on the nation the idea that actually *all* people had the *priestly* task of

prayer, and of serving God, to remind the nation that God wants the heart of *every* man and woman, for this reason *all* firstborn sons of *all the other* tribes were *also* presented in the temple, *as if* they were Levite boys, and they were consecrated to God.

But they did not have to stay in the temple; they were redeemed from that duty by the payment of five silver shekels.

Jesus was consecrated and redeemed in the temple, as he was the firstborn son of Mary, of the tribe of Judah. Joseph and Mary had righteously and devoutly done all things according to the laws of Israel.

They carefully walked in the old ways that they had been taught by their parents and in the synagogues of Israel. Laws that impressed on them that God is entitled to our *full* obedience, and that we are *in reality* impure and not able to obey him in accordance with his holiness.

RIGHTEOUS AND DEVOUT

But the old books of Israel also spoke of *new* things that were to happen in Israel, *new* things

that would change Israel, yes, even the whole world.

For many centuries pious Jews, who looked *back* in time to Moses and who followed his old precepts, had prayed to God for the *future*: “May I see the consolation of Israel.”

To devoutly follow all the laws of God, was obviously not enough; many of those laws only underlined that human-kind does not attain to the standard of God.

But there was an expectation that in the future, one day, God would offer something new: release from sin and imperfection, lasting forgiveness, eternal life – and no more fear of death.

We have met one of those pious people, waiting for the consolation of God, in our Christmas stories. We have come across seriously religious people – Joseph, and Mary, Elisabeth and Zachariah, and the Magi, and the Shepherds, and Anna. These were all good, religious people. And Simeon of course, he is called *righteous* and *devout*.

Those two characteristics belong *together*; that he was *righteous* seems to point to Simeon’s dedication to obeying the laws

of God and his decent life in society. That he was *devout* points to his heart being fully and personally focused on God himself.

A focus on fulfilling the law *only*, can be shrill and deadly; we all know people around us who are so oriented to their holy books with all their laws, and to following those to the letter. That seems so cold and heartless.

The opposite is also one-sided. People who think they can be individually devout to God without living a righteous life as defined by God’s expressed will in the Bible, and without a healthy Biblical theology, can mess up badly and discredit the name of God.

What we need in *our* life is a healthy balance of both. Righteous behavior *and* devotion to God himself. These two characteristics belong together, and they always need to support each other. And the lack of the one is *not* made up for by an overdose of the other.

Ask yourself, are you so taken up by living by Gods rules that God himself has disappeared out of the picture?

Or are you so taken up by your individual heart's relationship with God, that you forget that He has also given rules for a proper lifestyle? That He expects us to also obey in our social life?

In our modern time, especially in the Western world, it is quite common to hear people say that all that counts for God, is whether we live a righteous and devout life.

What religious life and devotion *to whom or to what* seems almost irrelevant to many. Why be critical of someone else's religion?

"If people truly try to live according to the precepts of their faith, and if they are serious about God, does it matter what religion they follow? Are there not many roads to the top of the hill?"

CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL

In this season of Christmas we came across many righteous and devout people. But for Mary, and Simeon, and all those others, that was *not enough*.

In our time, many would say of Simeon that he was a perfect

example of a good man, a fine religious man, no need to change anything, no need for more, he is okay. He is a lovely man, he does not harm anyone, so *he* does not need to change his life, his religion, *does he?*

But Simeon, righteous and devout, was not okay, and he knew it. He realized that his life was not complete! That is why he had prayed for many years that he would see *the consolation of Israel*.

And God had *promised* him that he would see this desire of his heart before his death.

In the Scriptures of Israel, the consolation Simeon prayed for, was equated with the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed of God who was to come to forever cleanse people of their sins, forgive their sins, and give eternal life.

It was not enough for Simeon to be righteous and devout, to follow the laws and have a heart burning for God. He needed this salvation of the Messiah.

When Simeon sees Joseph and Mary in the temple with Jesus, he takes the child in his arms; he then prays a beautiful

prayer, the fifth and last Christmas prayer that St Luke in his Gospel presents to us. Simeon took the baby, he looked at the baby, and he burst out in praise to God. He knew, inspired by God, that *this* child was what he had prayed for all his life.

So now he is no longer afraid of death, but he was ready to die:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

Sovereign Lord, our translation says. The Greek here is maybe surprising to you. It literally says: *Despot*.

That is *not* a popular word in our language, as it speaks of *absolute* power – and we know that human beings with that sort of power, are a danger.

To use the term for *God* is not so strange of course, as he *does* have absolute power. He is the sovereign Lord.

Many people are fearful of death, exactly *because* they know God as the absolute power – and they fear him, as they know their imperfections, their sins.

But when Simeon looks at the baby Jesus in his arms, he no longer fears God, or death. He knows that God is on his side, even on the other side of death. He was now prepared to die because he knew *what this child meant for him, and for the whole world*.

Sovereign Lord, *now* let me go.

So what did Simeon see when he looked at the baby in his arms?

SALVATION OF GOD

While he looked at Jesus, he thanked God that he has seen *the salvation of God*.

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people

Simeon did *not* just see a sweet little baby, but he saw God's *method of saving mankind*. What the laws of Israel could not do – that is, to forever offer salvation, purity, forgiveness, eternal life, *this child* could do.

It is important is to see that Simeon says of this salvation that *God* has prepared it. It is not man-made, it is not based

on our righteousness or our devotion. *God* has prepared salvation, and it was kicking in Simeon's arms.

Jesus did not just *preach* salvation, or *exemplify* salvation, he did not just *teach* it or *show us the way*. Well, yes, all that he did, but the real miracle is: Jesus Christ *is* the salvation of God.

Even his name, Jesus, or in Hebrew: Yeshuah, means: Yahweh saves. The Absolute Sovereign of heaven and earth *saves*, and He does this *through this child*, Jesus.

Simeon then proceeds to bless Joseph and Mary and he says to Mary:

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.

What a *strange* blessing! Simeon speaks of the salvation of God, and at the same time predicts to Mary that this baby, this savior, will be the falling and rising of many.

This child was not "sweet baby Jesus", but *God's watershed* in history and in human life. To choose *against* him, leads to our fall. To chose *for* him, means our rising. Our rising – that word in Greek is *anastasis*, the term used for the resurrection from the dead.

Being attached to Jesus Christ means actually life eternal – something that Simeon realized, and *therefore* death no longer made him afraid.

A person's relationship with or attitude toward Jesus is *absolutely decisive* for his eternal destiny. *Not* man's righteous keeping of the law, *not* a person's devotion... Salvation of God is donated to us *in this child*, Jesus Christ, by faith in Him alone.

Simeon does not spell out *how* Jesus was going to effect this salvation, but he hints at it when he tells Mary that a sword would pierce her soul. The sword mentioned is the *romphaia* – a large and broad sword that is able to create intense pain, piercing anguish.

Mary would suffer *immensely* for what people would do to Jesus. Did the prophets off Israel not predict that the Son of Man would suffer and die?

But exactly *this* suffering servant, whom we commemorate in Holy Eucharist, was to be the *glory* for Israel; that is what Simeon said in his prayer. And not only the glory *for Israel*, but also a *light* for the gentiles, that is, for all nations of the world.

The Copts, and many Christians in the world, celebrated Christmas this week; many other Christians celebrated Epiphany. Central in the feast of Epiphany is the appearance of God in the world through Jesus Christ.

During Epiphany, each year we read from the Bible about Jesus Christ being the light for the nations. God had finally appeared on the human stage, with salvation for all mankind. This is our Christian message!

Simeon grasped this when he saw Jesus and prayed his, well, his missionary prayer. He underlined that the salvation of God, concentrated in the Lord Jesus Christ, was for the whole world.

For the *gentiles* salvation meant light – as there darkness was so deep. Light speaks of revelation, of God making himself known as a holy God, and as a God of love, and joy, at the

same time, and he made himself known in Jesus Christ.

Salvation is *glory* for Israel. This glory refers to the presence of God with Israel as a column of smoke and fire, in the desert when they escaped from Egypt,

Later, the glory of God was *symbolically* located in the Holy of Holies in the temple, where only the High Priest could come once a year. But for hundreds of years, Israel had not seen this column of fire above the temple. Was God gone? Had God left Israel?

This child in the arms of Simeon, this child we spoke about in the Christmas season, he is the salvation, light and glory, given by God to the world.

CONCLUSION

This Christmas season helps us to focus; in the year ahead, let us be righteous people and devout, by all means. God wants our obedience and he wants our heart. But that in itself is never enough.

More important is that we embrace our Lord Jesus Christ with our whole mind and heart. He is the true revelation of

God, and the very presence of
God in our life. On him de-
pends our salvation.

When we kneel for communion,
let us kneel for our Lord Jesus
Christ, and in faith, with

thanksgiving, receive him as
our Lord and as our eternal sal-
vation.

+ In the name of the Father
and the Son and the Holy
Spirit. Amen