

***The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple –  
and two old people of hope***  
**Hebrews 2:14-18 & Luke 2:22-40**

Mary and Joseph take their young child up to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfil religious rites that all good Jews undertake following a birth. There's the ritual purification of the mother following a birth and the dedication of the firstborn male to God. It's a special, joyous time for the family, and as they bring the 40-day old baby to this holy place they meet an old man. His name is Simeon.

It may be, that for some of us as we age, we let go of our dreams and allow our hopes to die. Experience has taught us pragmatism. We leave dreaming to the young. Had that been so for Simeon, we couldn't blame him. All his life he had known his country held in the grip of foreign occupation. He had seen rebellions fail, insurrections crushed, and the roads lined with the crucified bodies of those who resisted the Romans. Yet, he hadn't ceased to hope.

Simeon was one of those known as *the Quiet in the Land*. They had no dreams of violence, and power, and marching armies. They believed in prayer, persistent prayer – in quiet watchfulness until God should come. They waited quietly and patiently upon God. That's how it was with Simeon. He gave himself to prayer and worship, in faithful expectation for the day when the Messiah, the Chosen One would appear.

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit had shown Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. Was this wishful thinking? Was this the delusion of an old man? After all, the old can get muddled – memories and dreams get mixed up with the present reality – or so the young sometimes think. But it seems to me that we are never too old to dream new dreams... It was so for Simeon.

Perhaps it was what we might call his intuition – that indefinable nudge – a prompting that urges us to do or say something. I don't know, but for some reason, standing there in the courtyard of the temple, Simeon sees this couple appear. There's nothing special about them. Far from it. They're a very ordinary couple of limited means. And they let Simeon take their little boy into his arms. At that moment he knows – he knows that in this little bundle of life that he holds is the fulfilment of all his dreams and hopes. This is the moment that he's been waiting for – longing for – dreaming for – praying for. And Simeon prayed:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.

Countless Christians repeat this prayer nightly, and it's often spoken at funerals or at the time of death. They are words of contentment – words that say, I know God keep's God's promises – words of fulfilment and peace. I hope someone will pray them over me as I die, and that in my heart of hearts, I will know that contentment, and peace, and fulfilment – for they are words that take us into the mystery of God's faithfulness and love.

Simeon finishes his prayer and turns to the parents and blesses them. Then, he faces Mary, and the tone changes.

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel,  
and to be a sign that will be opposed  
so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed —  
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

What does a young mother make of this? What grief and pain stabs her heart as she hears these words? Jesus will cause the falling and rising of many as he challenges their security and questions their sureness. Many will oppose him, revealing the limited nature of their response to the God who has called them.

The parents know that this is no ordinary baby, but here Simeon spells it out for them. This child is The One – but with that comes great suffering, both for him and for those around him. Luke is preparing Mary and us for Calvary.

What a contrast between the words of joy and fulfilment as the long-awaited dream of the Messiah is realised, and this ominous prophecy that speaks of pain and conflict. It's a bitter-sweet moment. But then, that's the nature of life. Dark and light go hand in hand. Joy and sorrow, birth and death, frequently accompany one another. Life is full of contrasts. More than that. Luke is telling us that this child, who is the Messiah, fully share the complex reality of our lives. The author of Hebrews reflected this as he spoke of Jesus sharing the same things that we do; that he was tested and suffered so that he could help us, and that death would not have the last word.

Here is life in its varying shades. But into this struggle breaks the light of hope. Simeon's prayerful song proclaims that into this complex reality of struggle and conflict, of joy and celebration, the light of God has come. His song proclaims that into the tapestry of our existence – into which is woven the reality of the struggles of life and death – the light of Christ has dawned.

Now another old person appears on the scene. Her name is Anna – an 84-year-old widow. She has known deep sorrow but hasn't grown bitter. Like Simeon, she hasn't let go of hope. She refuses to grimly resign to things as they are. Anna continues to wait expectantly for God to deliver her people from their shackles.

I see these two old people and hear the invitation to be a person of hope. This isn't hope based on wishful thinking or blind optimism. It's a conviction rooted in the reliability and faithfulness of God and God's promises. It's a hope grounded in who God is. It's a hope that says that the light will eventually triumph over the darkness, that wrong will be righted, justice will be done, and God will ultimately renew all creation. It's hope that holds us when we find our lives woven with the struggles between darkness and light.

In three and a half weeks we'll begin our Lenten journey and be confronted, as we are on every Ash Wednesday, with the fact of our sin and our mortality. We will journey with Jesus to the cross and witness the darkness of his suffering and death. We will face the complexity of human life and the costliness of following Christ. We do so as a people of hope, who, like Simeon and Anna, are heirs of a promise. They held within their arms the infant Jesus. Today, as we come to Communion, we hold the same Jesus under the forms of bread and wine – Jesus who offers us a peace that passes understanding, shedding an eternal light and keeping God's promise of undying love that transforms, upholds, and ultimately recreates us.

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