

Sermon preached at S. Botolph Cambridge, Candlemas (Sunday 2 February 2020, Sung Mass)

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Gospel: Luke 2: 22-39.

May I speak in the name of the Living God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thank you to all of you here for your generous welcome. Today is I think the last day on which I can wish you all a Merry Christmas. It is wonderful to be back, and I must comment on how wonderful the Sanctuary area is looking now with its new lights. Very appropriate on this of all Feasts, when we look to Jesus as the Light of the World, the light that casts out all darkness and fear.

The idea of a bucket list is a popular one, that is a list of exciting if not extravagant tasks or feats we want to accomplish before we do, at some inevitable stage depart this transitory life. Whether it is going on safari in Africa, climbing Ben Nevis, abseiling down the tower of St Botolphs, or eating Sachertorte in one of Vienna's finest and oldest cafes, these intentions are things that I think we all have. While I doubt I'll ever get to do the first two, and due to Fr. Stephen's unfortunate absence this morning, it seems that such agility-demanding exercises are not on the cards for this afternoon. I can, however, highly recommend Vienna for its culinary and cultural delights, having served a Pastoral Assistantship there last year.

There is, however, a problem with this idea of a bucket list. It presupposes that death is a tragedy, something terrible, the end, if not the opposite of life as we know it. But that if we have made the most of life while we could, then maybe our entire existence has not been a complete waste of time. The idea of a bucket list presupposes that death is a tragedy, the end - only it isn't.

The *Nunc Dimittis* is, thanks to the Prayer Book, surely one of the best known of all biblical texts; it is there in our Gospel reading this morning, Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. The danger is that we have heard these words sung - or maybe even sung them ourselves - so often, that they begin to lose their effect. Simeon's words are remarkable - he isn't merely expecting death, or grinning and bearing it, but embracing it, ready for it. And so, I want to spend some time with you this morning, asking: what is it about this encounter with the infant Jesus Christ and his earthly parents in the Temple that makes Simeon "ready to die" in peace?

First, some background. The elderly Simeon and Anna have been waiting in the Temple. The Temple is central to Luke's Gospel: the Gospel begins in the Temple with Zechariah, and ends there with Jesus' disciples, as is the universality of the Gospel message, not just for those in Israel, but to be a light to lighten all the Gentiles also. Simeon and Anna although historical people in their own right, are representative of Israel and the world as a whole; in a state of longing anticipation for the coming of the Messiah, the 'consolation of Israel', the fulfilment of God's promises. They have been persisting in prayer, fasting and good works. That

devotion and patience is rewarded in this morning's Gospel reading, as they finally behold the infant Lord in His mother's arms. Simeon, who has been promised that he will not see death until he beholds the Christ, is now able to pray these words, his mission having been accomplished: Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. God's promises to him have been fulfilled.

We have to wonder what made this particular child so special; after all, the opening of Leviticus 12 commands this act of ritual cleansing for all women, 40 days after childbirth. Jesus, although not bound by sin, nor conceived in sin, is still following and walking perfectly in the way of the Old Testament Law that He came to fulfil. Simeon must therefore have seen many thousands of babies being brought into the Temple in their mothers' arms. What was it therefore about Jesus, wrapped inconspicuously in swaddling clothes, a simple baby, that makes Simeon realise His unique true identity, and gives him the confidence to depart and face death in peace? We too are called to recognise the presence of Jesus in the ordinary, the everyday, the humble elements of bread and wine in this Holy Mass. It is not immediately an easy task, but one in which we need to grow, as the example of Simeon and Anna shows us, through prayer and fasting, to align our wills and vision with God's Will and Vision for us.

Simeon's identification, however, goes far beyond merely recognising that Jesus Christ is present, He doesn't just identify Jesus, but identifies the difference that Jesus Christ will make to his own life, and to the life of the world – because he sees that the wood of the crib points to the wood of the Cross, and ultimately to the

wood of the Altar, on which Christ's sacrifice is made continually present. Because he recognises that this child is the Messiah promised of old, the suffering servant of prophecy, the Messiah who by His cross, passion and resurrection will redeem the world, and bring His people out of darkness into His glorious light.

This is made clear when Simeon tells The Blessed Virgin Mary that Her child is “destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel” and that a “sword will pierce through Her own soul also”. So let’s take a closer look at these two phrases.

What does Simeon mean by the ‘fall and rising of many’? For that, we have to look back to the prophecies of the Old Testament, especially the 40th chapter of Isaiah, where it is written: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground will become smooth, and the rugged land a plain. The coming of Jesus is the bringing about of a kingdom of justice righteousness and peace, of overturning of the inequalities that exist in society, that Our Lady herself witnesses to in the *Magnificat*: He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.

By placing our hope and faith in Christ, we pray in confidence that we will be amongst those who will be raised up when Christ's role as judge of heaven and earth is accomplished. It is because of this hope that Simeon can depart in peace. His death is not a tragedy, far from it. Simeon no longer fears death because He sees in the Temple, the Light of Christ. In seeing that perfect Love, that perfect Light, in the midst of the cold and dark Temple and indeed world, He realises that he has nothing to fear. Seeing Christ is not merely the ticking off of his final item

on the bucket list, but a first glimpse of the Eternal Light, a glimpse of the face of God, allowing him to make the transition fully into his presence, to where he was headed and now dwells in – not the opposite of, but the fullness of being and fullness of life. For Simeon - and for us - seeing Christ in this place, in His Word and in the most Holy Sacraments ordained by Him, means that death for us will not be the end of life as we know it, but a continuation of our journey. Hopefully our time together in this Holy Place, our regular reception of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, having encountered the light of Christ regularly in this place, will make us ready to face death in peace, and are about preparing us for the continuation of our journey.

It is, of course, the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ that makes this a reality. Simeon's words point to that Cross. A sword will pierce Our Lady's soul also, he tells her. Our Lady will stand at the foot of the cross in despair and bereavement, and witness the darkest sensations of grief and pain. But the hope of Candlemass, and the Christmas season more generally, is That the Light of Christ can never be overcome. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We have nothing to fear. Because perfect love, the love that we see in the temple this morning, casts out all fear. Simeon sees that Not even death can separate us from that Light, because in His Cross, Passion and Resurrection , Jesus will go on to defeat even death itself.

And so may these candles that are lit this morning be to us, and all who enter and worship in this holy place, a reminder that we have nothing to fear. And may our

worship here prepare us, so that when we are called to return to our heavenly home, we will have the faith and hope, with Simeon, to say: Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.