

NUNC DIMITTIS

It is inevitable as New Year's Eve gives way to New Year's Day that our thoughts should be occupied with both the past and the future. On New Year's Eve we sing *Auld Lang Syne*, reflect on the year that is past, and cherish its best memories. On New Year's Day we look forward to the year that will unfold, and if your roots are in the South, as mine are, you may eat Hoppin' John with black-eyed peas or some other food that is deemed to bode well for the months ahead. However we celebrate the changing of the year it's 'Goodbye' to the old and 'Hello' to the new. The elderly man with the grey beard is out, the chubby baby is in.

In the Church January 1st has a different significance for us. As the eighth day of our celebration of the birth of our Lord, it completes the Christmas Octave. If we look at the Ordo Kalendar we note that it is the Feast of the Circumcision. And because a child's name was formally given at circumcision in those days, just as it is at baptism with us, today is also the Feast of the Holy Name. We read in the Gospel, "And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcision of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

Circumcision in biblical times was more than a medical procedure undertaken for debatable hygienic reasons. It was the sign of the divine covenant. After God established his covenant with Abraham and his family, promising that he would be their God and they would be his people, he commanded Abraham that all his male progeny should be circumcised. This circumcision marked the children of Israel and set them apart as the chosen people of God, even as baptism does in the Christian Church. It is also symbolically a cutting away of sinful flesh, or the old carnal life, and a corresponding setting apart of the people to the one true God and the way of righteousness, again as baptism is for us.

It is not without significance that circumcision involved the spilling of blood, even if only a small amount. In various dramatic ways the story of God's dealings with Abraham and the other patriarchs made it vividly clear that the covenant between God and his people involved a necessary shedding of blood; it entailed a sacrifice. All of this

sometimes gory ritual was intended to point, as we well know, to the future sacrificial work of the Messiah. The blood of the Old Covenant foreshadowed the blood of the New Covenant. It pointed to the sacrifice which, being perfect, would end all sacrifices. Commenting on the Feast of the Circumcision, Pius Parsch wrote,

Today flows the first drop of the Redeemer's blood; it is the *sacrificium matutinum*, [the sacrifice at Mattins, or] the morning offering; the evening sacrifice, *sacrificium vespertinum*, will follow on the Cross. Today a drop, after thirty-three years the full measure of His blood will flow. Today's feast, therefore, comes between Christmas and Easter, between the crib and the Cross; the Child is still in swaddling clothes and already Its blood is shed for mankind.¹

If this seems a forced interpretation, remember that it was at his circumcision that the baby received his name, Jesus, that is Savior, for as the angel had told Joseph, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus for *he will save his people from their sins*" (Mt. 1:21).

The story of the circumcision is followed immediately by that of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple several weeks later. When the forty days of purification prescribed in Old Testament law were fulfilled, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord, again as Old Testament law prescribed, offering for the occasion the sacrifice which the law prescribed for poor people, namely, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. It should not surprise us who have seen how thoroughly the canticles of Zachariah and Mary, the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat*, are set forth in the vocabulary and imagery of the Old Testament to see that the Old Testament continues to form the context for understanding the presentation in the Temple. It is impossible to read Luke's account and not recognize that he knew that in this scene was fulfilled that prophecy from the last pages of our Old Testament which we know so well from Handel's *Messiah*, the words of the prophecy of Malachi, "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come into his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in" (Mal. 3:1). In the presentation of this child in the Temple both parts of the Old Testament, the Law (cited a number of times in this context) and the Prophets, come to fulfillment.

¹ Pius Parsch, *The Church's Year of Grace*, Vol. I: *Advent to Candlemas* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1957), p. 245.

Luke continues, “And, behold,”—he is about to record something of particular importance—“And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.” Simeon, like the prophetess Anna, who prayed in the Temple day and night, was among the faithful remnant of Israel who continued to believe the promise of God in the midst of a largely unbelieving people and of a land now occupied by the minions of Caesar and to look for the fulfillment of this promise. Simeon was waiting for the consolation, or the comfort, of Israel, that is, for its salvation. You may remember that it is on this very note that Handel begins *The Messiah*. He quotes from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, the very same chapter that tells of the Lord’s forerunner, the voice crying in the wilderness. There Isaiah wrote, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isa. 40:1-2). The Lord is coming to his Temple, who before his days are o’er will accomplish the redemption that will comfort the city of God. It was for this consolation that Simeon waited and for it that he prayed.

Luke tells us next that it had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah, and that that same Holy Spirit of God led Simeon to the Temple at the very time that Joseph and Mary were bringing the child to offer him to the Lord. Without hesitation the old man takes the young child in his arms and utters his own prophecy. He pours forth the words of that canticle, the *Nunc Dimittis*, which many say is the most beautiful of all,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles,
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

I believe T. S. Eliot, who pondered deeply all of the events surrounding the infancy of our Lord, painted a knowing picture of faithful and righteous Simeon waiting at the end of his life. He wrote:

The winter sun creeps by the snow hills;
The stubborn season has made stand.

My life is light, waiting for the death wind,
 Like a feather on the back of my hand.
 Dust in sunlight and memory in corners
 Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land.

.....
 I have walked many years in this city,
 Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,
 Have given and taken honour and ease.
 There never went any rejected from my door.

.....
 Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
 Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
 [He will shortly tell Mary that a sword will pierce her soul.]
 Now at this birth season of decease,
 [Now at the hour of my death.]
 Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
 [The word 'infant' means literally 'one who does not speak.']
 Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
 Grant Israel's consolation
 To one who has eighty years and no tomorrow.²

Old Simeon puts one in mind of old Jacob, who toward the end of his life discovered that his beloved son, Joseph (a type of Christ), had not been killed after all but was alive and in a position of honor in Egypt. When he and his other sons went down to live in Egypt and he saw Joseph with his eyes, he said, "Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, because thou art yet alive" (Gen. 46:30). "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." Simeon had seen the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, and had been granted his peace. To behold our Lord with the eyes of faith, faith that looks to him and trusts him alone for our salvation and that of the world is to know the greatest fulfillment of life and thus his peace. Simeon's cup was full and running over. Nothing more did he desire. "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart." Like Abraham he was ready to "go to [his] fathers in peace" (Gen. 15:15).

Simeon's brief canticle concludes with a description of that salvation which he beheld with his eyes in Christ. It was a salvation which God "prepared before the face of all people;"

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles,
 and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

² T. S. Eliot, *A Song for Simeon*.

The salvation promised by God through the nation of Israel was to be for the whole world. It would take some time for the early Christians, most of them Jewish, to recognize that this salvation was for the heathen as well. St. Luke, who wrote this account, had traveled with St. Paul throughout the Mediterranean world taking the message to Jew and Gentile alike. God had promised Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Again and again the prophets said the message would go to the Gentiles as well. Matthew's way of making this point at Jesus' infancy was to tell of the Magi coming from the east. Luke has the angel bring the lowly shepherds good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, and has old Simeon speak of Christ as a light to lighten the Gentiles. It is because of this reference to the light that, as some of you know, the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord, which occurs on the second day of February, is also known as Candlemas, the other bookend to Christmas, since on that day all the candles are blessed that will be used in church throughout the year.

“A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.” The canticle ends on that note, “the glory of thy people Israel.” Christ is the *light* for the Gentiles and the *glory* of Israel. Again we remember that this whole scene takes place in the Temple. The glory of which the angels sang at his birth to shepherds in the hills referring to God's glorious manifestation in Christ is now brought into the Temple in Jerusalem. In the very same action in which *from the human side* we see Mary and Joseph bring their humble offering of a pair of turtledoves as they present their child to the Lord, *from the divine side* we see the glory of the Lord being manifest in the Temple.

Having begun by blessing God, old Simeon, his canticle complete, now blesses the holy family. His words carry a warning, however. He tells Mary, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.” His words and his deeds, his life and his death, will be like a sword dividing the people. Some will believe him and follow, but many will reject him and put him to death. He will be a sign which shall be spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many will be revealed, —and in an aside to Mary he tells her that a sword will piece through her own soul as well.

The fall and rise of many, . . . a sword that will divide. That is a note that is not often sounded at Christmas. The peace on earth, good will towards men is often spelled out without qualification. It's a part of the poisonous banner of blind inclusivity so pervasive today. But think once more of those words of Malachi that we remember from *The Messiah*. "The Lord, whom you seek shall suddenly come to his temple." You recall that they continue, "But who shall abide the day of his coming, and who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire." The refiner's fire, like the sword, divides and separates. And that will be the story of the gospel.

And so our Lord has come. He has been born in Bethlehem and dedicated to God in the Temple of Jerusalem. His words and deeds will follow as the infant becomes first a child and then a man. He will live and die and rise again, and his gospel will go forth to all the world, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel. Now as then he is a sign spoken against, a sword that divides, bringing about the fall and rise of many, always posing a question for every man. Will they behold him with the eye of faith and know like Simeon his consolation and peace, or will they go their own way, trust their own wisdom and reject his light for darkness?

A new year is upon us. The grey-bearded old man is on his way out. He has seen all the promises of the Law and Prophets come to fulfillment in the child he briefly holds in his arms. The child will turn the old into the new. He will fulfill and transform the Law and offer a new commandment: that we love one another as he has loved us. The future belongs to him. Let us all on this day of new resolutions resolve afresh and ever more deeply to worship this child and to walk in his light that at the end of our life we may depart in peace..