

“Simeon: Just and Devout, Waiting...”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, December 27th, 2015

“And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:25-26).

We often portray Simeon in our Christmas tableaux as a priest, but there is no positive indication that he was a priest. All that we know about him is stated in these two verses. On one hand it may be useful to think of him as an ordinary man, as this could encourage us to believe we, too, can receive the Holy Spirit. On the other hand a priest in the Word represents anyone who is good, or more specifically *the good in anyone*, and we know that the Spirit of Truth – which is the Holy Spirit – does come to those who seek and do what is good. Again, although we sometimes portray him as an old man there is no specific indication whether he was old or young, only that he was “waiting for the Consolation of Israel.”

Our topic today is Simeon and what he represents in each of us, whether we see ourselves as “good” or not. For the Lord gives His goodness to everyone, and it is important for us to recognize it and appreciate its expectant, hopeful quality, not to mention the promise of the Holy Spirit to fulfill that hopefulness.

First of all, let’s look carefully at a few of the key words in the text. We read, “there was a man in Jerusalem...” the word used here for man is *anthropos*, from which we get *anthropology*, the study of people. So the reference is to a person, not just a male. But the person is Simeon who of course is a male. What’s the point? Well, it may be a small matter, but it shows the inclusiveness of the story: the character had to be either male or female, but the implication is that *any* of us should be able to identify with him. That he was “in Jerusalem” is also significant, for Jerusalem represents the church, especially the doctrine or teaching of the church. So we have a character who represents the study of the Word, or perhaps more accurately, the life or application of the Word. This also is the spiritual meaning of the name, Simeon, which comes originally from the Hebrew word for hearing. To hear is to obey, and Simeon clearly represents the quality of obedience in all of us, or as we sometimes say, “truth in the will,” which is “the will of *doing* the truth that is of faith.”

Now this man was “just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.” Wherever we find two adjectives together in the Word, or two names or nouns, generally we can assume that they refer to some quality from each of the *will* and the *understanding*. This is true here, as the word, just, refers to good will or the desire to be honorable and fair, while the word for “devout” really means prudent or circumspect. This refers to the thought of the understanding balancing the desire of the will from experience and reason. So the picture of the man is one of love and wisdom working together - as they should do with each of us. And then it says he was “waiting.”

Now you might think of this waiting as a passive exercise, but again, the original Greek gives a different feeling: here we find that what it means really is that he was “eagerly expecting” the Consolation of Israel. He was looking for it, watching for it, anticipating it, making himself

ready. And what is the Consolation of Israel, anyway? Of course we know it is a reference to the Lord, but think again the specific meaning of the word: in Greek it comes from the same root as the word for Comforter or Helper, the very term used for the Holy Spirit that was to come after the Lord finished His work in the world (John 14:16,26). So here was Simeon eagerly expecting the Holy Spirit, *and the Holy Spirit was upon him!* We'll come back to this thought in a moment. But note, his hope and expectation was based on the fact that "...it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

What exactly does *this* mean? Well, Christ is actually a title that means "the anointed" and so refers to the Lord as King, so this is actually a reference to His government by means of truth, or laws of order. And we know that when the Lord came into the world He came as *a living form of the truth*: He was "the Word made flesh." So when Simeon sees the Baby he says,

"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace according to Your Word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, *a light of revelation* to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people, Israel" (2:29-32).

Because of the emphasis on truth, light and revelation all through the story of Simeon it may be useful to mention one more curious translation fact: when Simeon gives his famous blessing, although it says, "Lord," in English, the original Greek actually says "Ruler" or "Master," using the word from which we get "Despot" – not a negative word in this context but clearly meaning one with supreme and total power. Normally the Greek for Lord is *Kyrios*, so this is a significant departure, and, of course, relates specifically to the power of truth. In relation to this power Simeon acknowledges that he is a mere servant, or more emphatically, a slave. He can do no more nor less than serve the truth.

Finally, he declares the truth about the Lord's whole life in his statement to Mary: "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against ... that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." A "sign" in this case is a standard, the ultimate standard of life and truth against which all other lives and all other judgments will be measured. But remember, the lives and judgments that concern the Lord are spiritual, not material, so the purpose of His revelation is to reveal or *expose* what is in people's hearts. This He does simply by declaring what is good and true; our response to that – if we pay close attention – reveals our inner character.

Now all this may have been a lot to take it, but it shows the depth of what is really contained in just a few verses of the Gospel. And with that background hopefully we can see the profound and personal meaning in the story of Simeon. It is after all a very moving story, and it speaks to the affections we may have for the presence of the Lord in our own lives.

So, again, who is this Simeon within us? And what is he doing in Jerusalem?

Deep within every person, the Writings tell us, there is a core, a *remnant* of things good and true that have come from the Lord and that are never taken away from us no matter how difficult or disorderly our lives may become. Simeon evidently represents this remnant. At the darkest time in the history of Israel, when its religious life was dominated by hypocrisy and greed, here was a

man who was not only just and circumspect, but eagerly anticipated the coming of the Lord. In his life we see an image of the part of ourselves that knows what is right and loves what is good no matter how shameful other aspects of our lives may be. This part longs for the freedom to speak and hear the truth, and to live according to the order that will bring peace and blessing into the world of our spirits. It is affirmative, optimistic, confident, *eagerly expecting* the help and comfort of the Lord, and in fact being guided by the Spirit of Truth to receive Him as He is presented in the sanctuary of our minds.

Remember, Jerusalem represents the church, and especially the truths of the church. The fact that Simeon was in Jerusalem shows that this wonderful affirmative spirit lives within us in the principles of religion that we all have to some extent stored away in our memories, even if those memories are obscured by challenges and doubts. This part of us knows that we will not die as long as we continue to hope and prepare for the coming of the Lord. Indeed, if we remain faithful to the Word we will *never* die, for we will not be limited by time or space or any of the challenges of life in this world.

Still, we must wait for the Lord to come. So what is this waiting all about?

Again, as noted earlier, it is not a passive state. It is an active state of preparation. Psychologists tell us that if we give up on something we are much less likely to get it than if we continue to hope for it and to believe it will come. The Lord spoke of this also when He said, “All things, whatever you ask in prayer believing, you will receive” (Matt. 21:22). In the Simeon story it seems clear that his “waiting” for the Consolation of Israel corresponds to our state of affirmative spiritual preparation for the Help and Comfort that can only come as we actively engage in the conscientious, disciplined effort to do what is just and right – because it is just and right.

As an illustration think of the challenge we face as we seek the Lord’s Consolation in any difficult situation: what shall we do? How can we know? What will be best for ourselves and others? Answers to such questions don’t come quickly – or easily; the Spirit of Truth cannot flow into us apart from our effort to live justly and wisely, so that we can see the Truth when it is presented to us. But if we are willing to learn, willing to grow, willing to accept the truth and acknowledge the faults it exposes in us, then we will indeed find the answers we seek and we will know the way we should go.

It is the same with any spiritual challenge, whether it be in thought, affection, or relationships: if we are just and circumspect, eagerly anticipating – seeking – the Lord’s instruction, it will come, and we, too, will be led by the Spirit into the temple, that is, the sacred place within our minds where we will see the innocence and tenderness of His love, and where we will be able to say with Simeon, “MASTER! Now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word.” Not that we will always get what we want – or what we think we want. The Lord is not nearly as interested in what we want as He is in what will truly make us happy, which often involves a long, circuitous process and a great deal of interaction with people who may not agree with us or with how we think things should be done. Remember, He said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; *not as the world gives* do I give to you” (John 14:27).

This is the key to our spiritual fulfilment as represented in the Simeon story. For when Simeon blessed Mary it was not ALL good news! “Behold,” he said, “this Child is destined for the *fall*

and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken *against* (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also) that the thoughts of many hearts may be *revealed*.” Remember, the Lord did not come to bring peace as we ordinarily think of it, but a real *sword*, that we in our spirits might cut through the self-pity and misconceptions of our own lives and gain the deeper blessing that comes with victory over all such things. *Let’s face it, we will not always enjoy having the thoughts of our hearts revealed.* Still, if we are to grow in spirit and with the Lord’s help “overcome the world in us” we must recognize that this is part of the process.

Mary in the Word pretty clearly represents the affection for truth. It is easy to understand the fear and dread Mary must have felt when she heard these words of Simeon, but now think of the Mary within each one of us, hearing the same words, knowing that something awesome and frightening must take place in our own lives if we are to fulfill the prophecy. Our affection for truth is not a carefree affection! It cannot expect to have an easy time. On the other hand it serves a vital role in carrying and nurturing the Spirit of Truth, that it may live and grow within us and eventually lead us through the work of transformation.

What burdens must this love bear! What pain must it endure as it suffers through the persecution of the truth it has laboured to bring forth, truth that will not settle or conform to ordinary expectations, truth that seems to wander all over our spiritual world attracting the attention of the poor and lame as well as the rich and healthy attitudes within us, drawing the criticism of the proud and arrogant, deceitful elements of our imagination, and finally suffering the greatest humiliation of all, a total rejection by the worldly conceits we have not been able to overcome! What grief must this affection for the truth accept until one day it sees – and feels – the truth transformed, alive, radiant and powerful, having overcome all the forces of darkness, yet without having hurt or condemned anyone, *the Consolation of Israel indeed*, the Light of the world, “the true Light which gives light to everyone who comes into the world” (John 1:9).

The story of Simeon, his praise of God and his prophetic blessing of Mary all represent for us the story of our faithful obedience of the Lord in His Word. It is at once a beginning and an end, for in it we see both what the Lord requires of us and what He promises if we persevere in that work. It won’t be easy; that’s not the point. But it will be tremendously rewarding as we anticipate and then finally receive the simple gift of His salvation, the innocence of love in its Divine Humanity, the Word accommodated to us so that we can reach out and take it up and bless God because of it, and then at last depart in peace.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 2:13-23: children’s talk on the Escape from Herod
 Luke 2:21-35 on the story of Simeon
 Apocalypse Explained, portions of #813 on “the patience of the saints”