

The church in waiting

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 28th December 2008.

Texts: Luke 2:22-40, Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 148, Galatians 4:4-7

A couple of weeks ago, Archbishop Rowan Williams was interviewed on the *Today* programme. He was asked what lesson we should be learning from the current economic crisis. The answer, Archbishop said, was *patience*. Wealth that could be accumulated overnight could also be lost overnight! *Real* wealth comes from making things that people value, and building communities in which these valuables can be enjoyed in a sustainable way; such wealth can never be built up overnight, but takes years of sustained hard work. 'What we need,' said the Archbishop, 'is to learn patience.'

Simeon in our Gospel reading today had learnt this lesson well. He was a very patient man. Simeon, we are told, had been 'looking forward to the consolation of Israel' all his life. We aren't told how old he was when he finally found what he was looking for. But the juxtaposition with the story of Anna means that we are supposed to draw a direct comparison between these two characters. Anna was at the 'great age' of 84; so Simeon would have been similarly advanced in his years. He had been 'looking forward to the consolation of Israel' for a long time. And now, after a whole life time of expectant waiting, he had found it, and uttered those famous words of the *Nunc dimittis*, which in the unforgettable rendering of the KJV says:

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;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Although Simeon had waited a whole life time, he knew that this was but a small fraction of the patience that God had asked of his people Israel. We can see this from his canticle, which resonates deeply with the prophecies recorded in the second half of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-66). These prophecies came from a much earlier era, some half a millennium before Simeon. There were some faint echoes in that passage read to us from Isaiah 61 earlier. But let me give you two more direct echoes, again quoting from the KJV because the resonances are clearer:

And he said, ... I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. (49:6)

I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light to the Gentiles. (42:6)

The resonances between the *Nunc Dimittis* and Isaiah are clear. Indeed, I am sure Luke wanted us to pick up such resonances, because he told us that Simeon was ‘looking for the consolation of Israel’. The various forms of the word translated ‘consolation’ there is a favourite in the Greek version of Isaiah familiar to Luke. We don’t have time to go through all the examples. But here is the most famous, because Handel set it to music:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak comfortably to Jerusalem ... (40:1-2a)

Or you can say ‘Console, console my people.’ Isaiah’s words, of course, found partial fulfilment when the Jews came back from exile in Babylon. But Luke tells us that these prophetic words continued to echo down a 500-year-long corridor, and reached a climax of fulfilment when aged Simeon saw Jesus in the Temple.

500 years is a long time to wait. But our epistle reading today reminds us that God’s time scale is even more expansive than that:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law ...

‘Born under the law’ – these words reminds us that God’s plan of redemption started way back with the choosing of a people and the covenant at Sinai. But the words ‘born of a woman’ takes us even further back, to the beginning of the book of Genesis, when God said to the serpent, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’ (Genesis 3:15) In other words, the ‘light’ that ‘[lightens] the Gentiles’ was conceived from the dawn of humanity. God works on an expansive time scale.

In our age of instant satisfaction, such expansive time scales are hard for us to comprehend. If we were God, our slogan and game plan would have been, ‘I want to save the world, and I want to save it *now!*’ Zap!

But that is not God’s way. God appears to be content to work over expansive time scales, moving patiently towards that ‘fullness of time’. And even after the ‘fullness of times’ had arrived, it was not going to be instant satisfaction. Simeon understood this well. Yes, his eyes had seen the salvation that God had prepared before the face of all people. But that was only half of the story. The other half of the story is what Simeon said to Mary,

‘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.’

No, we are not talking about ‘instant salvation’ here – add water, stir for 1 minutes, and, *voilà!* No, even after the ‘fullness of time’ had come, it was going to be a process involving painful ups and downs, and more patient waiting. This proved to be a hard lesson even for that first generation of apostles. As far as I can see, all of them to the one got it wrong to start with. They all expected that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the drama of salvation would finally be brought to a close in a flash. They expected Jesus to return within their own life time and wrap everything up publicly, ‘before the face of all people’. But it was not to be.

The New Testament itself is a record of how the early Christians gradually gave up their expectation of ‘instant salvation’, and learnt to become a *waiting church* instead. And Simeon, together with Anna, are undoubtedly the patron saints of the ‘church in waiting’. Let’s look a little closer at Simeon’s waiting.

Luke tells us that Simeon was ‘looking forward to the consolation of Israel.’ The verb translated ‘looking forward’ in the version read to us just now is rendered ‘waiting’ or ‘awaiting’ in other English versions. Luke chose a somewhat unusual Greek word here, a word that is only used about a dozen times in the whole of the New Testament, with Luke accounting for about half of these. For instance, he also uses it again at the end of the story of Anna, describing how she ‘[spoke] about the child to all who were looking [or waiting] for the redemption of Jerusalem.’

Luke tells us what kind of waiting he has in mind later in his Gospel. In Chapter 12, Jesus was teaching his own disciples, and he said to them:

‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.’ (12:35-36)

‘Those who are waiting for their master to return ...’ – it’s the same Greek word as used of Simeon in Chapter 2. But here we get a rather detailed metaphorical description of the kind of waiting we are talking about: ‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.’ In other words, we are talking about an *active preparedness*.

Simeon and Anna were actively prepared all their lives. That was why they were in a position to recognize a new dawn in God’s redemption of the world when it happened, and were able to bear witness of it to other people. We have already seen that Simeon was looking for that ‘consolation’, or ‘comfort’, which Isaiah announced 500 years before, and that his canticle resonates deeply with other of Isaiah’s prophecies. So he was a man who had understood an important truth: when God speaks, God’s words leave a very long wake indeed. Expectant waiting means living in this wake of divine speech ‘dressed for action and [with] our lamps lit’, looking for and bearing witness to the ways in

which God's words continue to be fruitful in our time. Simeon also understood that God's word could be fruitful in surprising ways – a baby from a poor provincial family being 'a light to lighten the Gentiles', for example.

And we learn from John that this baby was in fact *the* Word of God *par excellence*. We, the church in waiting, live expectantly in the wake of *this* divine Word with a capital 'W'. Our calling is the same as that of Simeon and Anna: to live 'dressed for action and [with] our lamps lit', looking for and bearing witness to the fruitfulness of the divine Word in our time.

As we do so, we must remember that we are not looking for signs of 'quick fixes'. Since God works patiently over expansive time scales, we also need to learn patience, and look for signs of the fruitfulness of God's word over long time scales. Perhaps a year's end is a good time to do that. Looking over a whole year, it may be that we can see signs of having lived in the wake of God's fruitful word more than we can in the hustle and bustle of daily living.

And these signs can be very mundane. Having listened to all the amazing things said of her son in the first few weeks and months of his life, Mary returned to Nazareth. Luke uniquely gave us a glimpse of what happened in the next part of the drama: 'the child grew and became strong'. In other words, Jesus suckled, got bigger, took his first faltering steps, got potty trained, etc., etc. How terribly mundane! But for those who, like Simeon, was 'guided by the Holy Spirit', they could see that God continued to work – the child was 'filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.' Mundane, but God working his purposes out nevertheless. But often, the signs of God at work are even counter-intuitive: the 'light to lighten the Gentiles' eventually took the form of a sword that pierced Mary's soul, an inglorious death on a Cross.

Simeon foresaw that. He knew that the baby would grow up to be 'a sign that will be opposed'. And yet, he was content to say, 'Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.' So finally, expectant living is living by faith. This Christmas time, this year end, as we face a new year ahead, let us pray that the Spirit of God will teach us how to live together as the church in waiting, living patiently in the wake of his fruitful Word, looking expectantly for signs that this Word is living and active in our midst, and bearing witness to these signs in faith. Amen.