

Sermon for Ascension Brandon.

Sunday 27th January 2009

Christmas 1

Today is the 2nd day of Christmas and according to the carol, our true love is scheduled to send two turtle-doves to go with that partridge in a pear tree. Don't be surprised however if, due to inflation and hard economic times, you get a couple of wood doves instead of the more expensive turtle dove.

And don't expect anything at all from St. Matthew. He skips the 12 days of Christmas completely and leaves you wanting until the Magi visit nearly two years after Christmas day.

St. Luke sends along a gift on the 8th day of Christmas. Luke writes, "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

It's not that St. Luke is a scrooge, it's just that he's got the song all wrong. According to Luke, it's not until the 40th day of Christmas that the two turtledoves arrive. Luke writes that "When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, two turtledoves or a two young pigeons." The law of Moses said that this was to take place on the 40th day after the birth of a baby.

Actually, what the law required was that a lamb was to be offered for the sacrifice of purification. But in case of hard economic times where the couple just couldn't afford a lamb an exception could be made and two turtledoves would be acceptable. Even though they were poor and clearly below the poverty line, it has been noted by some, that technically speaking, Mary did bring a lamb to the temple for her purification offering. We'll come back to that in just a minute. But there's someone we need to meet first.

"Now, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon." Luke doesn't give any biographical background on Simeon, which doesn't stop folks from filling it in on their own. Some say that Simeon was an old man and some say that he was a priest. But Luke doesn't say any of this.

A fascinating tradition among the Eastern Orthodox is that Simeon had been one of the seventy-two translators of the Septuagint - the translation of the Old Testament into from Hebrew into Greek around 200 BC. As the story goes, Simeon wondered about how to best translate Isaiah 7:14 "Behold, a virgin shall conceive..." Should it be 'virgin' or should it be 'young woman?' Supposedly, an angel appeared to him and told him that he would not die until he had seen the Christ born of a virgin. Which would have made Simeon a very old man when the 40th day of Christmas finally arrived.

What Luke actually tells us about this man is that he was "righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

I wonder what it was like for Simeon knowing that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Christ?

Was Simeon anxious to see the Lord's Christ, because he wanted to die? Or was he afraid to see the Lord's Christ because that would be it for him? Luke doesn't say, and we certainly can't speak for Simeon on this.

So then, one day a young couple came to the temple with their 40 day old baby and a cloth sack with two turtledoves in it. Actually, this happened every day and on any given day there would have been any number of parents bringing their babies to the temple for presentation to the Lord and purification.

But on this particular day, Simeon was also at the temple. Chances are, being the "righteous and devout" man that he was, Simeon was probably at the temple every day. But on this particular day, Luke says, 'he came in the Spirit.' To be "in the Spirit" is not like being in the Christmas spirit. It means that Simeon was in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes so that they can see Jesus. Without the Holy Spirit, our eyes remain blind and we can't see Jesus for who He really is. We may see a person whose name is Jesus of Nazareth, but we cannot see that He is the Son of God who has come down from heaven to bear our sin and be our saviour.

Jesus spoke about those who have eyes to see and ears to hear and yet "seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." (Matthew 13:13). There are lots of

people who come to church, maybe even every Sunday. They listen to the Word and the sermon, they sing the hymns and pray the prayers but they just don't get it. They come, they go, and somehow they think that it's all about trying harder to be good so that God will save you because he only saves good people. St. Paul says it's like there's a veil over their eyes.

How many other people were in the temple that day who saw Joseph and Mary and the baby but who never saw who they really were? Simeon came to the temple "in the Spirit." The veil was lifted, his eyes were open.

Luke's gospel is full of people who come so close to Jesus and to whom Jesus comes so close yet they fail to see Him for who He is. Even His own disciples, as they walk along the Emmaus Road, don't see Him for who He really is. He opens the Scriptures for them and although their hearts burn within them, they still don't recognize Him. Not until He opens their eyes in the breaking of the bread. We'll come back to that too.

Back to the text. I wish that Luke had recorded more of what Mary told him about that day at the temple. What did Simeon say to her? And why was she willing to hand her precious baby over to a complete stranger? All Luke tells us is "he took him up in his arms and blessed God saying, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation that you prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'"

"My eyes have seen," he says. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Simeon saw Jesus as He is. And in Jesus, Simeon saw all of God's promises fulfilled in one brilliant moment of revelation. He held in his arms the offspring of the woman promised to Eve in the garden of Eden who had come into the world to crush the head of the serpent. He held in his arms, the child who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary who would suffer under Pontius Pilate to atone for the sin that blinds our eyes from seeing and stops our ears from hearing and corrupts our minds from understanding.

"For my eyes have seen your salvation." Real seeing doesn't take place with the eyes but with the mind and the heart. Even a blind man can say, "I see what you mean." Even the blind men along the side of the road knew who Jesus was when He approached them. "Lord, have mercy upon us." They knew who He was.

Sometimes, even lifelong church members and leaders in the church just don't see it. Sometimes, recent converts see things a whole lot better. And often children get it better than the adults.

Simeon's eyes were opened and he got an eyeful of the divine revelation. He saw and understood that this baby was not just his personal saviour. He was the revealer of God to the Gentiles and the glory that Israel had long been waiting for. This baby was the salvation that God had prepared "in the presence of all peoples."

How much did Simeon see as he looked into the face of this baby? Did he see this baby whom he held in his arms, held by the arms of a cross? Did he see this baby who had been brought to the temple for purification, purifying all who are brought to Him who is the true purifier and the true temple? Did he see this baby who is wrapped in baby clothes, wrapped in burial clothes and wrapped in Easter's glory? Did he understand that this poor couple who had come according the law with their two turtledoves, had also brought to the temple a lamb. In fact, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?

Luke doesn't say. But what Luke does tell us is that Simeon sees enough to know that death no longer mattered. Simeon was consoled with the consolation he had been waiting for. He who consoles those who find no meaning to life and those who are afraid of death had come into the world and was dwelling among us. 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.'

It is no mere coincidence that we sing Simeon's song, the Nunc Dimittis, "Now Depart" after we have received the Lord's Supper. Here, in this Holy Communion, "the salvation that the Lord has prepared," is present among us in the bread and wine. Here, in the breaking of the bread, our eyes are opened and we see the body and blood of Jesus Christ in, with and under the bread and wine. Here at this Altar, you hold Jesus in your hands just as Simeon held Jesus in his.

Jesus instituted the holy meal, that by it, we may receive the purification for all of our sins that He has accomplished by His body and blood, given and shed for us. Like Simeon, we here hold in our hands the long awaited consolation of Israel and we are consoled in our living and in our dying so that we may live to the glory of God and depart in peace.

How appropriate then that after we have held this God/child in our hands and tasted His life and salvation for ourselves that we borrow Simeon's words and make them our own. "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all peoples."

Amen.