

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

(Cape Town - 28 December 2008)

Text: ²² When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people
Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:22-35).

We celebrated Christmas this past week. But the story of Christmas does not end on the day of Christmas. It continues. And this exactly what we see here in our sermon text.

Since the birth of Jesus a lot had happened - not all recorded in the Gospel of Luke. The Magi, following a star that had appeared, arrived from the East to worship the new born king. Short afterwards there was the terrible massacre in Bethlehem. The soldiers of king Herod arrived and killed all Babies younger than two year. But Joseph and Mary together with Jesus had escaped to Egypt shortly before the massacre.

In our sermon text we read what happened about 40 days after the birth of Jesus.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus arrive at the temple of Jerusalem. They came back to Jerusalem simply to fulfil a number of Israelite laws. That they actually did so indicates, that this child was not going to enjoy preferential treatment in this world. He was born “into this world” and subjected himself to whatever was necessary “according to the Law of Moses.”

This law related both to mother and child. In ancient times a woman who had a child was deemed to be impure and had to remain at home for a period of 40 days. It was only after this waiting period that she could go to the temple.

This time of waiting was not without meaning. It was partially introduced to provide the mother with a time of “recovery” after birth.

But after this waiting period she had to go to the temple and make a purity offering. The offering was usually a lamb. But if people couldn't afford it, as it was the case with Mary and Joseph, a pair of doves would suffice.

The other law had to do with the child, in particular the first-born child. You will remember the story of the Exodus how in the last night, the first born of the Israelites were saved by the blood of a lamb painted on the door frames. The saving of the first-born was an act of grace on the part of God. So that the Israelites would never forget, all first born male children were set aside or consecrated to work as priests in the temple of God: In our congregation this would be Peter, Errin, Sheldon, Caleb, Storm, Matthew - almost all the boys in our congregation.

Later on this priestly duty was taken over by the Levites. But the law nevertheless demanded that the first born child is presented at the temple and that a sacrifice is made to redeem the child of this duty.

But in Luke's Gospel this sacrifice to redeem Jesus from the duties of a priest is never really made. Instead the scene is interrupted by the words and actions of an old man, called Simeon. All his life he had been waiting for the “consolation” of Israel, which is the “comfort” the prophet Isaiah had announced 500 years before. In Isaiah 40 v. 1 we read: **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her .. that her sin has been paid for.”** For years the old Simeon waited for this to happen. And we read in the Gospel that the Spirit of God had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah, “the Christ”.

And when Jesus and his parents walked into the temple, Simeon by divine revelation (like the Shepherds, like the Magi) just knew this baby is the “the long awaited

Christ". And he took Jesus on his arms and every wish he had was instantaneously fulfilled. The marvelous thing is, that his wishes were not particular: "I want this, or that, or that!". He just wanted "the Christ". And when he held the Christ, he said the words: "***You now [O sovereign Lord] dismiss your servant in peace.***" Those are the words of a man who has reached the end of his life and is totally satisfied. There is nothing more he desires.

But Simeon says a bit more. And there is a message in the words he speaks to Mary. I want to highlight to aspects of what "effect" this message had.

I

The first effect is "amazement" on the part of Mary. In other words, she did not expect what she heard. Simeon said:

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

Simeon announces the "universality" of this Christ. He is not particular, confined to one nation only. This Christ, is the Christ of all people, Gentiles and Israelites.

Mary is surprised. Why? Because she grew amongst a group of people that always reserved God and his grace to themselves. God is for me, but not necessarily for you. And I want God's grace for myself, but may he punish all the "other" evil in this world!

Simeon sings: "Your salvation for all people." And again these words echo what the prophet Isaiah had announced 500 years before. We read in Isaiah 49, one of the "Servant Songs", God saying:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

But remember Mary was uneducated. And the priest and scribes simply overlooked these passages. Mary is amazed: This child is the saviour of "all people"!!!?

II

This insight leads to the second effect of Simeon's words - and that is

“consternation”. By that I mean, the realisation: This event is “critical” to me.

If this Christ is the Saviour of all people, it also means: Everything depends on my relationship to him and his relationship to me. Standing before the Sanhedrin, the apostle Peter captured the importance of this revelation with the words: “...**there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved**” (Acts 4:12). Not your name, not the name of another religious leader: “This is the name given to us, by which we are saved.”

Here in our sermon text, Simeon says: ***“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.”***

This child will either make people “rise” or “fall.” He is like rock: Either he is the rock on which you pull yourself out of the roaring sea, or he is the rock against which you bump your foot and which makes you stumble and fall.

In this child the hearts of people are revealed, Simeon says. Invariably this child becomes the “dividing line” . It divides between those who trust themselves and those who trust God... those who live independent of God, and those who depend on God... those who secure their own future, and those who seek their future in God.

This child divides. There is not “neutral” position. No sitting on the fence. It is either everything or nothing. He is either highest priority, or no priority. There are only those who follow him and those who don’t. We see this throughout the life of Jesus. Either they praise or they curse him. Either they love him, or reject him.

But in our response to this child our *deepest thoughts of the heart are revealed*. Simeon is an example of someone who opened his heart to this child and peace flooded into his old life.

This “Song of Simeon” we sing in every single service, almost without exception. We sing it immediately after Communion: “Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

I go to Communion: Under the bread and the wine I receive the Christ. In faith I accept his salvation. And if I do “peace” enters my life ... and it is truly Christmas (the Christ with me!). Amen.