

## **Sermon: Simeon's Song**

### **Luke 2:21-40**

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In our home, the Christmas season is officially over after 7 January, as that is the day when the Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas. The plastic Christmas tree will go back in its box, the decorations are shelved again.

We have read the story of Joseph and Mary who came into the temple with their little baby, Jesus. For them, this was also a time of closure. Their Christmas season was almost over, and it was time to move on and to live for God.

#### **1. Jesus in the temple**

Five times in the passage that we have read the word 'law', referring to the Hebrew laws of Moses, is used. From the beginning of his life, even when he was still unaware of it, Jesus was subjected to all the laws of God, thanks to Joseph and Mary, two very upright people.

When our Lord was eight days old, he was circumcised, in accordance with Jewish law.

And now, 40 days after his birth, again in accordance with Jewish law, he was brought into the temple.

Joseph and Mary had gone to the temple for two reasons. One reason was, that Mary had to become ritually clean. In Israel, a woman was considered impure for 40 days after bearing a son. This meant that she could not properly worship God in his temple.

For her ritual cleansing, Mary brought with her two doves, as prescribed in the laws of Moses. A priest would kill those doves, sprinkle some of the blood of those pigeons over Mary, and officially declare her clean.

These laws reminded Israel, and us, that all human beings, even when they are as religious as the mother of our Lord, are in need of being made clean. We are unclean compared to our holy God.

Joseph and Mary had also come to the temple for consecrating Jesus. All parents had to do this for their firstborn son. They had to pay five silver shekels, to redeem that first boy, in accordance with Israel's religious laws.

What was the meaning of this redemption of the firstborn son?

God wanted his whole nation to be a priesthood; all men and women were expected to live for him, not just the Levites that were called to perform the duties in the temple.

If you were a boy, born in the tribe of Levi, and you happened to be the oldest son, then you were to serve as a priest in the temple.

But in order to impress on the nation the idea that actually all people had the priestly task of prayer, and of serving God, to remind the nation that God wants the heart of every man and woman, for this reason all firstborn sons of all the other tribes were also presented in the temple, as if they were Levite boys, and they were consecrated to God.

But they did not have to stay in the temple; they were redeemed from that duty by the payment of five silver shekels.

Jesus was consecrated and redeemed in the temple, as he was the firstborn son of Mary, of the tribe of Judah. Joseph and Mary had righteously and devoutly done all things according to the laws of Israel.

They carefully walked in the old ways that they had been taught by their parents and in the synagogues of Israel. Laws that impressed on them that God is entitled to our full obedience, and that we are in reality impure and not able to obey him in accordance with his holiness.

But the old books of Israel also spoke of new things that were to happen in Israel, new things that would change Israel, yes, even the whole world.

For many centuries Jews, who looked back in time to Moses and who followed his old precepts, had prayed to God for the future: "May I see the consolation of Israel."

To follow all the laws of God, was obviously not enough; many of those laws only underlined that humankind does not attain to the standards of God.

But there was an expectation that in the future, one day, God would offer something new: release from sin and imperfection, lasting forgiveness, eternal life – and no more fear of death.

We have met those pious people, waiting for the consolation of God, in our Christmas stories. We have come across Joseph, and Mary, Elisabeth and Zachariah, and the Magi, and the Shepherds, and Anna. These were all good, religious people. And Simeon of course, he is called righteous and devout.

Those two characteristics belong together; that he was righteous seems to point to Simeon's dedication to obeying the laws of God and his decent life in society. That he was devout points to his heart being fully and personally focused on God himself.

A focus on fulfilling the law only, can be cold and shrill; we all know people around us who are so oriented to their holy books with all their laws, and to following those to the letter. That seems so cold and heartless.

The opposite attitude in religion is also one-sided. In our modern time, especially in the Western world, it is quite common to hear people say that all that counts is that we believe in something.

What sort of devotion and to whom or to what seems almost irrelevant to many.

"If people truly try to live according to the precepts of their faith, and if they are serious about God, does it matter what religion they follow? Are there not many roads to the top of the hill?"

## **2. Consolation of Israel**

In our time, many would say of Simeon that he was a perfect example of a good man, a fine religious man, no need to change anything, no need for more, he is okay. He is a lovely man, he does not harm anyone, so he does not need to change his life, his religion, does he?

But Simeon, righteous and devout, was *not* okay, and he knew it. He realized that his life was not complete! That is why he had prayed for many years that he would see the consolation of Israel.

In the Scriptures of Israel, the consolation Simeon prayed for, was not very clearly

defined. It was equated with the coming of the Messiah, with forgiveness, with the real presence of God, with the return of God to his temple.

Our own lifestyle and our devotion are important, but they are meaningless without the presence of God himself. It seems possible to be such a good person - and still there is this sense of God not being there.

When Simeon sees Joseph and Mary in the temple with Jesus, he takes the child in his arms; he looked at the baby, and he burst out in praise to God. He knew, inspired by God, that this child was what he had prayed for all his life.

So now he was ready to die; he had seen the best in life!

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

Sovereign Lord, our translation says. The Greek here is maybe surprising to you. It literally says: Despot.

That is not a popular word in our language, as it speaks of absolute power – and we know that human beings with that sort of power, are a danger.

To use the term for God is not so strange of course, as he does have absolute power. He is the sovereign Lord.

Many people are fearful of death, exactly because they know God as the absolute power – and they fear him, as they know their imperfections, their sins.

### **3. Salvation of God**

But when Simeon looks at the baby Jesus in his arms, he no longer fears God, or death. He knows that God is now on his side, even on the other side of death. He was now prepared to die because he knew what this child meant for him, and for the whole world.

So what did Simeon see when he looked at the baby in his arms? While he looked at Jesus, he thanked God that he has seen the salvation of God.

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people

Simeon did not just see a sweet little baby, but he saw God's method of saving mankind. What the laws of Israel could not do – that is, to forever offer salvation, purity, forgiveness, eternal life, the presence of God, this child gives.

It is important to see that Simeon says of this salvation that God has prepared it. It is not man-made, it is not based on our righteousness or our devotion. God has prepared salvation, and it was kicking in Simeon's arms.

Jesus did not just preach salvation, or exemplify salvation, he did not just teach it or show us the way. Well, yes, all that he did, but the real miracle is: Jesus Christ is the salvation of God. That is why belonging to Jesus Christ is what our Christian faith is about.

Our relationship with and attitude toward Jesus is absolutely decisive for our standing with God. Not our righteous keeping of the law, not our devotion... Salvation of God is donated to us in this child, Jesus Christ, if we embrace him by faith.

Simeon does not spell out how Jesus was going to effect this salvation, but he hints at it when he tells Mary that a sword would pierce her soul. Mary would suffer immensely for what people would do to Jesus. Did the prophets of Israel not predict that the Son of Man would suffer and die?

But exactly this suffering servant, whom we commemorate in Holy Eucharist, was to be the glory for Israel; that is what Simeon said in his prayer. And not only the glory for Israel, but also a light for all nations of the world.

Simeon prayed a missionary prayer. He underlined that the salvation of God, concentrated in the Jesus Christ, is for the whole world.

This child in the arms of Simeon, this child we spoke about in the Christmas season, he is salvation, light and glory, given by God to the world.

## **Conclusion**

This Christmas season helps us to focus; in the year ahead, let us be righteous people and devout, by all means, as shown by all those wonderful characters in the Christmas story. God wants our obedience and he wants our heart. But that in itself is never enough.

More important is that we embrace our Lord Jesus Christ with our whole mind and our heart. He is the true revelation of God, and the very presence of God in our life. On him depends our wellbeing.

When we kneel for communion, we kneel for our Lord Jesus Christ, and let us then with Simeon, pray to God: "Lord my eyes have seen your salvation."

**+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen**