

TFTD Lent 2025.04 Saturday March 8th
Nunc dimittis ... Luke 2.22-40



**Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
According to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared in the sight of all people:
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
And to be the glory of thy people Israel.**

Luke's opening chapters contain three songs or 'Canticles' which are said or sung every day (somewhere in the world) to mark the passing of day and night. In the morning we greet the 'Dayspring from on high' with the words of the Benedictus, Zechariah's song over his baby boy, expressing (as Robin said on Thursday) the faith God has in ordinary human beings. In the evening we say (or sing) the Magnificat, Mary's song, celebrating the 'great reversal' of the Gospel, God touching and transfiguring ordinary human lives. And at night-time we sing (or pray) the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon's song of trust and confidence, as we commit ourselves into God's

hands for the night and celebrate the light of Christ shining in the darkness.

Rembrandt obviously loved painting this scene — there are several versions of it, most famously the one that hangs in the National Gallery in London. This is an earlier version from the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, a bit more theatrical — but all of them bring out the contrast between the old people, Simeon and Anna, hanging around the temple, faithfully waiting for signs of God's promised salvation, and the freshness and light streaming from Jesus — who is only six weeks old at this point in the story. (I love the way Rembrandt clearly likes painting old people, wrinkles and all — no hyaluronic acid in these paintings!) And indeed, that's one of the 'great reversals' of this story: it's the dotty old folk, the ones everyone ignores, who keep their eyes open and see God's salvation when Mary and Joseph walk into the Temple to perform the age-old rituals for their new-born baby.

Simeon's song, like all the Canticles, is all about the fulfilment of promise. It's saturated with the language of scripture, of the Old Testament prophets who looked forward to the coming of God's promised salvation: like the prophet Malachi, who wrote, hundreds of years before, 'The Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to his Temple' (Malachi 3.1). But Simeon, like Malachi, also knew that God's fulfilment always exceeds and challenges our expectations: 'But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appears?' (Malachi 3.2). Like Rembrandt's paintings of the Temple, our vision of God always gets festooned with dust and cobwebs which need to be swept away by the freshness and vitality of the real thing.

So here already, right at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, comes a hint that God's salvation is wider and more inclusive than most people expect. When we think about God's salvation, it's natural to start with our own problems: we are always the centre of our own little world. But Simeon sees that Jesus will be not only the crowning glory and salvation of his own people Israel, but 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' too — that is, a salvation reaching out to the whole world. The prophet Isaiah had already glimpsed that a vision of a God who was only interested in his own special

people was too narrow. Maybe God had called his own special people not just to keep them safe but for a wider purpose — for the sake of the whole world? To share the light of God's love with the other nations as well? Maybe God isn't just interested in Us — he's interested in Them as well? That's the startling vision of Isaiah 42.6 and 49.5-6 which is echoed in Simeon's song (no wonder Anna is throwing up her hands in astonishment!). As we shall see, this is a theme that runs through Luke's Gospel. (And note that this isn't an 'either/or' vision but a 'both-and' vision: it isn't Israel or the nations, but Israel and the nations.)

But Simeon also sees (as Isaiah saw) that this subversion of expectations won't be easy to get across — Jesus' message will be a painful and difficult one, bringing conflict within his own people and a sword to pierce Mary's heart: This child is destined to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be rejected. The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own heart also (vv.34-35). As Zechariah saw, Jesus came 'to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1.79) — but the path of peace is not an easy one to tread. That's why Candlemas, the feast of Jesus' Presentation in the Temple, marks the turning-point of the year, the end of Epiphany and the moment where we turn our steps towards Good Friday — and a good place to end this first half-week of Lent.

God bless,
Loveday

