

## Luke 2:22-40

### Two Glimpses of salvation

#### Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

This time of year always produces a rash of comment and opinion about things Christian in the newspapers and on the television. Some of these Christians take great exception to. Others they rather like. Which mostly depends on how supportive the comment seems to Christian views. Let's take just two examples from this festive season. The first is the one that Christians, on the whole, weren't very keen on...

On Christmas Day evening theologian Robert Beckford presented a Channel 4 programme called "Decoding the Nativity". Apart from the laughably cheap adaptation of the title of a well known novel to try and get an audience this programme had all sorts of other questionable things about it as well.

The first was that Beckford presented it as if all the things he was finding out that "theologians think" about the events surrounding the birth of Christ were completely new to him. In fact, of course, what he concluded was pretty much the same as the beliefs he has been lecturing and writing about for years.

More controversial to many though was his interview with the historian A N Wilson, who also said what he has been saying for years but probably to a lot of people who had never heard of him before. Here's what he said:

*"They [Matthew and Luke] are not, repeat not, historians. And if you start looking at them simply as historians you will eventually end up chucking them away and not really seeing what their books are about. ... What they are telling us about is their faith. They are much closer in time than we are to the historical Jesus but they don't know any more about him than we do."*

Matthew Parris's opinion piece in the Times on December 27<sup>th</sup> was much better received by Christians – I know this because I have been sent the web link by loads of people in various e-mails! And it's true that, at first sight, Parris is very positive about Christianity. Here's what he says about returning to Malawi, the country of his childhood:

*"Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from*

*the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good."*

Speaking of the people he met Parris continued: *"It would suit me to believe that their honesty, diligence and optimism in their work was unconnected with their personal faith. Their work was secular, but surely affected by what they were. What they were was in turn, influenced by a conception of man's place in the Universe that Christianity had taught."*

He concludes: *"Removing Christian evangelism from the African equation may leave the continent at the mercy of a malign fusion of Nike, the witch doctor, the mobile phone and the machete."*

Christians have generally responded very positively to Parris's article. And he has certainly hit on something very true and very important – that there is both great personal freedom and great social responsibility in the Christian world view that makes for people with a healthy self-understanding and a sacrificial willingness to serve others.

But, and it's a big but, I don't think Parris has really said anything fundamental in his article that A N Wilson would disagree with.

Because for both these writers it doesn't really matter whether the Christian message is true or not. In fact both men are convinced not only that Christianity is untrue but that there is no God.

Both men want us to believe that you can have spiritual enlightenment, that there can be something real and powerful in the Christian message, that is nothing to do with whether or not that message is actually true. Nothing to do with whether or not Jesus was actually the god-man. Nothing to do, even, with whether or not there is a God.

And that's how many, perhaps most, people in our society think today isn't it? They recognise that centuries of Christian influence on our country has produced many good things. They applaud the good works of Christians they see in society. But

they think you can hold on to all that and not believe that the Christian message is actually, objectively, really, historically true.

And there are many people in churches up and down the country, and surely in this church too, who have started out believing the Christian message as real history but who, worn down by the years of constant cynicism from friends, family and media, now defend Christ only half-heartedly and are much happier arguing for Christian morality than arguing the case for Jesus himself.

Well this morning Dr Luke wants us to know that A N Wilson and Matthew Parris are both wrong. And he wants us to know that when we think we can separate historical events from spiritual reality we are wrong too.

Because in these verses Dr Luke teaches us that only the real history of Jesus Christ brings spiritual light to give us true hope.

We're going to look, in turn, at Simeon and Anna's words about Jesus and learn that only the coming of Christ, the god-man, in history brings peace and hope.

### **1 Only because Jesus has come we can die in peace (v22-35)**

It was customary for the mother of a recently born child to go to the temple and offer sacrifices because childbirth, for Mary, and assisting with childbirth, for Joseph, made you unclean under Jewish law.

Male children would also be circumcised, and, for a first born son, an offering made to the Lord for them, around this time. Although the child himself didn't have to go to Jerusalem since Bethlehem is only a few miles away it was quite natural to take a family day out to go there.

So off head Joseph, Mary and Jesus for a trip to the magnificent temple that King Herod was in the middle of building – in fact, like most modern building projects, it still wasn't finished when Jesus returned to Jerusalem as a man 30 years or more later!

They go with their sacrifices – which are those of the poor, or at least the lower middle classes rather than of wealthy people providing some more evidence of Jesus' family's humble origins.

But if the family were expecting a quiet day out they were in for a shock. Because this visit to the temple, like all the other events in the short life of the boy Jesus so far, was to be punctuated by two remarkable events.

The first was their encounter with Simeon. His song has become known to Christians through the ages as the *Nunc Dimittis*, "now depart" and is said and sung week by week in thousands of churches around the world.

Let's see what Luke has to tell us about this man and about his hymn...

Simeon was a devout man; he sought to love and be obedient to the Lord in all his life. That God was incredibly gracious to Simeon is shown by the fact that. V25, "the Holy Spirit was upon him", an honour that even most of the great heroes of the Old Testament were not granted. Specifically, we are told, God had somehow; through a vision, a dream or a another prophet, revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ – the anointed King and Saviour that God was going to send.

And, as he sees this little baby being wheeled through the temple in his Maclaren buggy, or the ancient equivalent, he knows that this is the child. It must have been quite a shock for Mary. After all, as those of you who have recently become parents will know, strangers are always coming and cooing over newborns. But they don't usually actually pick them up; especially not men. And they don't usually sing songs of praise to God for them!

We tend to assume that Simeon was old. Every picture I've ever seen of him portrays him as an old man. But there's no reason in Luke's account to believe that he was an old man. And, in a way, our assumption that he was an old man undermines the whole point Luke is trying to make.

Why do we think Simeon is an old man? Well as far as I can tell the only reason is that it seems that having seen the Lord's Christ he is happy to die.

But the whole point of the story is that **having seen the Christ** he is content to die. Simeon doesn't want to die because he's an old man and mortally wounded. This isn't like the battle of Pelennor Fields in Lord of the Rings where the aged king Theoden feels that he can die content because he has shaken off the ghosts of his past and acquitted himself with honour in battle.

It doesn't matter what age Simeon is. Now he has seen the Christ God has sent he can die in peace because he knows there is a saviour.

I wonder if there is something of a challenge here for us, in a church full of mostly younger people. What would it take to make you content to die this morning? For many of us, lots of the time, there are a host of, to be honest, quite petty ambitions that we feel we must fulfil before we will be ready to die. I would be content to die when I've...

- Had sex
- Had more sex
- Had children
- Seen Australia
- Owned my own home
- Had a really cool car

Or whatever it might be.

But do you really think that any of those things will ever have been enough? When you're 90, should you live that long, do you think there won't be anything left in the world that you want to do? There might not be many things left you are able to do. But I don't think most of us will ever run out of interesting stuff to experience in this world.

No the thing that should make us content to die is having seen the Lord's Christ. The way to be content to die? It's to know that there is a saviour for you.

Now obviously if you have a dependent elderly relative or young children or a wife or husband or parents you won't want to die because you won't want them to experience hardship and grief. And that's fine.

But for a Christian to not want to die for themselves, at any time in life, is to have failed to understand Simeon's hymn. It's not because he thinks there's nothing else good for him in this life that he can die in peace. It's because he knows that what God has for him in the future is much better. His eyes have seen God's salvation.

And if we have seen that salvation too – not through our own eyes but through Simeon's eyes – then we should share his peace. Because the salvation Simeon saw wasn't just for him. And it wasn't even just for Jews. Jesus, he said, v32, was a light for revelation to the Gentile. This peace is for all sorts of people. It is for us. And if we have come into the light we too can die in peace.

For the first time in Luke's gospel we also get a hint from Simeon of the cost of the salvation that Jesus

will bring. For having sung a hymn of praise to God he then gives a word of warning to Mary. Jesus, he says, will be a cause of division and strife in Israel.

Jesus will be a revelation. But people's responses to Jesus, v35, will also reveal some important things about their own hearts.

And he will come to a point that will bring massive grief to Mary – a sword will pierce her soul. A sword in the soul, we know, came about as Mary watched her son and her saviour die on a cross just thirty short years later. Only because Jesus has come, and died in our place, can we die in peace.

Do you notice how completely different Simeon and Luke's views are to those of Matthew Parris and A N Wilson.

For Simeon it really matters that this is real history. He was not content to die because he had had an idea. He wasn't now looking forward to the next life because he had worked out a new philosophical concept in his head. He wasn't confident in the possibility of rescue for people from all nations because he had had a startling insight while meditating.

All of Simeon's hymn of praise is based on having seen and held a particular real baby who, God had revealed to him, would bring real division in history between people and who would meet a horrible end for the salvation of others. For Simeon this is not about an idea. It is about a person. A real person, in history, who he met.

And think about Luke, who wrote this gospel. What an insult it is to him to suggest that everything he is encouraging his friend Theophilus, the first reader of this book, to believe in, is based on anything other than solidly researched historical fact.

Luke was explicit and clear in his introduction that his account is based on the testimony of eye-witnesses. That it is orderly. That reading it can bring about certainty. Those are not the descriptions of a man who knows nothing about the historical Jesus. Either Luke is telling the truth about things that really happened in real history. Or he is making it up so that it looks as if it really happened but actually it didn't. You can't get round this with A N Wilson's guff about "telling us about his faith".

It is only because Jesus, in the flesh, actually, really, historically is God's saviour that any of us can die in peace.

Otherwise we are just heading off to a great unknown. A total mystery of darkness which may be heaven, hell or nothing. But that's not what Luke thought. And it's not what Simeon thought.

They believed that those who had seen the Christ; whether in the flesh, like Simeon, or through the real and historical accounts of his life, like us and Luke, could face death at any stage in life with peace because he is the saviour.

## **2 Only because Jesus has come there is hope for our city (v36-40)**

The second witness to the amazing identity of Jesus at the temple is an old woman called Anna. Now she really was old. Either she was 84 or she was 84 plus 7 plus however many years old she was when she got married – so at least 104. Anyway she was pretty old.

We are told that Anna was a prophetess; a high honour indeed as there are only a handful of female prophets in the whole of the Bible.

It seems that she is led to Jesus not by the direct word of God but by a godly response to the words of Simeon. As a prophet she understands the implications of Jesus bring the Christ and begins to explain them to the assembled crowd; Mary and Joseph no doubt looking on in some bewilderment by this time!

It's worth pausing just for a minute at this point to see who we have had, so far, to be witnesses to the amazing things that God is doing...

- There's Zechariah and Elizabeth; high born but disgraced in that society by childlessness.
- Then there was Mary; the teenage girl.
- Joseph, the carpenter from an obscure town in the North.
- A bunch of shepherds; disreputable working men.
- Then there's highly respectable Simeon.
- And, finally, Anna; the elderly widow.

What have we learned? Well surely that this saviour is for anybody.

The trouble with churches is that, over time, they tend to become homogenous. When churches work well, as I think, on the whole, ours does, the people who come to them and a part of the family spend a lot of time together. And we become more and more like each other – we see the same movies,

read the same books, listen to the same music, cook the same meals for dinner parties and so on and so on. So it's easy for me to forget, and I'm sure it's easy for you to forget too, that this saviour is for anyone. For all sorts of people. For the respectable prophetess and the not so respectable shepherd. For the young woman and the old woman. For the man in Jerusalem and the man in Nazareth.

And that, of course, is exactly what Anna the prophetess sees too. We don't know exactly what she said because Luke doesn't record the words. But we know what they were about – she spoke, v38 to ALL who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

This saviour, Anna knew, was for everybody. Everybody who was looking forward to the rescue, to the transformation of Jerusalem. Anna doesn't disagree with anything Simeon has said. But she picks up on a different strand of what the coming of the Christ will mean. Not just that individual believers can live in confidence and die in peace; though not less than that.

But also that the coming of Jesus means redemption for Jerusalem. For the city of God. For human beings collectively as well as individually. The gospel, the message of Jesus Christ is good news for communities as well as for individuals.

Essentially that was the point Matthew Parris was making in his article in the Times. He was saying that the Christians he met in Africa had a good understanding that they were individuals, responsible ultimately for loyalty directly to God not to family, tribe or nation. AND that they did good in society because they knew they were accountable to God for loving their neighbour.

Christianity, Matthew Parris thinks, is good news for individuals and for communities. The trouble is that he doesn't think it's true. But that's not good enough for Anna. And it's not good enough for Luke. And it shouldn't be good enough for us either.

Do you see what it is that Anna does? She doesn't speak about an idea. She doesn't tell the people that there is a way to live that can put you at peace with the universe and so make you behave in a better way towards your fellow man; neither kow-towing to him or trampling over him.

No. What she does is speak about this child. It is this child, the Christ, who can bring hope to cities –

redemption to Jerusalem and hope to Liverpool – because it is this child who is the saviour of the world.

It is not just the good things he said or the amazing things he did, as important as they are. It is who he is in history that matters to Anna.

And it must be who he is that matters to us too this morning. I believe, with Simeon, that the Christmas story means that I can die in peace, knowing that there is a saviour and that he is my saviour. And I believe, with Anna, that the Christmas story means there is great hope for the transformation of societies and communities, starting now but finishing in a perfect new city in a perfect remade world.

But I can only believe those things, in fact those things can only be real and meaningful if the child was really born. If Luke's account really is what really happened. And the great news is that Luke is absolutely crystal clear that this is what really happened. That there really is a saviour for me and a saviour for my city. And that there are real people in history who I can trust who saw him with their own eyes.

I don't know if you're into New Year's resolutions or not. But, if you are, why not add this one to your list.

This year despite the scepticism of those around me, I, with Dr Luke, am going to believe in the Jesus of history. The Jesus we meet in the pages of the Bible. The true Jesus. The only one who can enable me to face death with peace and give me hope for my city.

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*4<sup>th</sup> January 2009*