

31.1.10 8.45 and Redgate Luke 2:22-40 1 Cor 13

A light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

What an extraordinary thing for Simeon to say.

When Jesus was 80 days old, Joseph and Mary went to the temple to give the sacrifice that was required by the Jewish law, and to praise God for the safe arrival of their first born son.

Because they weren't rich, they would have gone to the traders selling the animals for sacrifice, and have bought 2 doves or pigeons, the self same traders that Jesus overturned the tables of, some 30 years later. Mary and Joseph would have then, gone to the priest on duty and presented their offering and would have waited and prayed while the ritual was performed.

After that, their time was their own, and before returning to their home town, they would have looked round the Temple, which was in the process of being built, the main rooms would have been completed, so that it could function, but the ornamentation and gilding would have still been ongoing.

I remember going to see the Liverpool cathedral when only the Lady Chapel was in use, and the rest was a builder's yard, and experiencing the pride of the people there, because of their vision for the future, they didn't see rubble and dust, they saw beauty and glory.

In the Temple, summoned by the Holy Spirit, was a holy man called Simeon. He was a man of prayer and devotion, a man who took his faith so seriously that God was able to tell him that he would see the Messiah before he died, a true servant of God, who spent his life in prayer.

As he walked into the Temple, God was able to guide him to the young couple that had brought their child for blessing. Without hesitation, Simeon recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the holy one of God. He took him into his arms, and inspired by God, spoke this prophecy over the child.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

The reason why I think that this is an extraordinary thing to say is that this was a Jewish prophecy, about a Jewish messiah, in a Jewish Temple, so why did he speak about the Gentiles?

The Jewish nation at that time, believed that they would be saved from the invaders of their land, the Romans and any other belligerent neighbours who fancied their chances, by a mighty saviour who would lead them to victory and cleanse the land of any foreigners who weren't wanted. The Messiah. He wouldn't be there to bring the Gentiles into the picture; this was a Jewish Messiah for the Jews. They had what you might call a parochial mentality, their God was for them, other people

had their own gods, even if they were false gods, that was nothing to do with them, their God was for them.

So, to say that Jesus would save not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, and that he would be a sign for the nations, was totally against common thought. No wonder that His parents marvelled at Simeon's words.

However, the Gospel was spread throughout the known world, the Roman world at least, within a century of this meeting, and the word of God was known to every nation, not just the Jews, not even just their nearest neighbours, the Samaritans.

The Good News was too good to keep in one place. The Gospel broke out of the restraints of Palestine and could not be kept down. It was like the time the Pharisees told Jesus to keep His disciples quiet, when they were praising God, and He said, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

In our time, we have also heard the Good News, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and we have had the opportunity to meet with the Christ, the Messiah, in the person of Jesus Himself. It is our turn to reach out to the "Gentiles", those that have not had the opportunity to worship God, those that have lost out on knowing Jesus as their Lord.

We can't keep these things to ourselves; we can't just be wanting to praise God with people of "our Tribe", people like ourselves. We can't keep the Good News inside the Temple; it has to spread to the world.

When Mary and Joseph heard the words of Simeon and spoke to Anna the prophetess, they didn't stay where they were and live in the Temple, excluding others from knowing Jesus, they took Him home so that he could grow to maturity and take on His mission and service to the whole world.

As part of the Temple worship, they would have used the Psalms, the same way that we use hymns, and Ps 48, which is the one set for today, is a typical one. There is a significant verse in it, and it goes like this.

Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth.

Our mission, is to open our hearts and minds to the people that do not yet know our Lord. Our mission is to open our Temple, that is, our churches to people that have not yet felt able to come in, and because they feel uncomfortable about coming in, it is also our mission to go out to the people, where they are, where they feel comfortable, to reach out to them, just as they are.

This is why the things we do as united churches are so important, the Nativity in the village at Christmas, the walk of witness at Easter, the church page in the Formby Times, but also those informal things that we do that help outsiders become insiders, like the workshop on Saturday

mornings, Celia's cafe on Tuesdays, Tiddlers on Mondays.

Simeon knew that God was not going to restrict Jesus' ministry to the one nation, He was going to reach out to the world. Simeon knew that this was the one that would make a difference, as we say, that this new baby would grow to be the most influential force that the world would ever know. And it is our task to make sure that our generation also hears the Good News that the Saviour of the world has come.

And if you find this a daunting task, let me direct you to the final verse of the psalm,

For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.