

“He Came in the Spirit into the Temple”

In the name of Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Today’s reading from St. Luke’s Gospel is the second of three biblical narratives the Evangelist provides that tell us something of Jesus in his childhood. The first, of course, is the Christmas story that describes his birth and how, notified by the angels, the shepherds come to see him. Jesus himself doesn’t do much in that story except lie there and look cute and babyish. The story is more about what others do to him, what they say about him, and how they react to him: it describes how Jesus is wrapped in strips of linen. He’s placed in a manger. Angels announce his birth. Shepherds worship him and then go about spreading the story; meanwhile Mary ponders these things in her heart. Jesus is the focus of the story, but the actors are all other people.

In this second of Luke’s accounts of our Savior’s childhood, Jesus is still quite passive. Again, the story is about what other people do to him, what they say about him, and how they react to him. But there’s noticeable elevation from the first account to the second. Now we’ve gone from the dead of night to the light of day. We’ve moved from a poor sleepy village to the bustling and prosperous capital. We’ve gone from a stable to the Temple. The people involved are no longer rough shepherds, considered back then to be just a step above cutthroats and thieves; now we’re dealing with people described as devout and dedicated to serving the Lord. Even in their reaction to Jesus and the things they say about him, there’s a step up. I mean, we’re not told what the shepherds actually say to others about Jesus. They just see him and make the word about him known. Ah, but old Simeon in the Temple, he takes the baby Jesus from the arms of his virgin mother and launches into a song which, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he makes up on the spot. And then he prophesies to his parents about the child’s future. And what we’re seeing in the stepping up of the second narrative from the first story is increasing revelation about who the Christ child is and what he’s come to do. The light that shone only dimly at first is beginning to glow brighter and spread its rays. And with that in mind, let’s look at today’s account more closely to see what other light shines forth from it.

We find Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. They are here for two reasons. The first is for Mary’s purification. The Law of Moses dictated that for 40 days after giving birth to a child, a woman was considered ceremonially unclean. We don’t need to go into the reasons for this; but it actually worked to her advantage. It meant that for over a month she would be exempt from all public gatherings and required religious festivals. This would give her time to recover and rest up before she was expected to be anywhere. At the end of the forty days, she had to perform a religious ritual that rendered her clean again. So, that’s one of the reasons Mary and Joseph have come.

The other reason specifically mentioned in the passage, is to offer a sacrifice on behalf of Jesus. The Law required that every first born son be redeemed by means of a sacrificial offering: a lamb, if you could afford one or a pair of pigeons or doves if you couldn’t. That the holy couple went with the latter gives us some insight into their financial situation. God didn’t choose a rich family for his Son to be raised in. Anyway, the rationale behind this sacrifice harks back to the time of the Exodus. Recall that the Lord delivered his people Israel from slavery at the cost of the Egyptian firstborn. Israel’s firstborn would have died too in that last dreadful plague, but they were protected by the blood of the lambs on their doorposts. When the angel of death saw it, he passed over those homes and spared the firstborn inside.

That plague was the one that made the Pharaoh finally relent and let Israel go free. But as a lasting memorial of the event, the Lord told his people that their firstborn sons still belonged to him and were subject to death unless redeemed or “bought back” by sacrifice. Joseph and Mary have come to the Temple to fulfill this law for Jesus. Or, say it another way, they are here to redeem the Redeemer by spilling blood for him. Thus their actions foreshadow what Jesus himself will later do when, keeping the Law for us all, he would shed his own blood to redeem us.

It's at this point in the story we are introduced to an elderly fellow named Simeon. We're told that he is both righteous and devout, which doesn't mean that he's perfect or sinless. No, it means that he trusts in the Word and promises of God and that he adheres faithfully to his religious obligations. Three more things we're told about him: first that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. That means that he believed in the Savior the Lord promised to send, and that he looked forward to his appearing. Second we're told that the Holy Spirit is upon him, which means that he is supernaturally empowered to see, understand, and trust in things which God reveals that others without the Spirit can't. And third, we are told that at some point in his life the Holy Spirit let him know that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

We are not told how this revelation came to him or when. Was it direct revelation in which God actually spoke to him? Was a dream, like Joseph had when he was told to take Mary as his wife? Did an angel appear and tell him, like when Mary was told she was to be Jesus' mother? Was it a word from some other unnamed prophet? We can't say. But we may be given a little bit of hint by his name, Simeon, which means “he hears.” The idea is that however this Word of the Lord came to him, he believed it.

And so, now in his old age, we anticipate that he comes to the Temple daily, searching the faces of strangers wondering, “Is that him? Or that guy over there, is he the One?” And what do you suppose he's looking for? Probably someone very impressive, who exudes charismatic warmth and charm that magnetically draw people to him. You know, like the way they depict Jesus in religious art. Even if there're a hundred people in the picture, there's never any question about which one is Jesus. He stands out. The white of his robe is whiter than anyone else's. He practically glows. That and he's the only one with the telltale red sash. That's a dead giveaway. You never have to do a Where's Waldo with Jesus. But religious art isn't real life. And it's certainly not the way the Lord usually chooses to reveal himself. Instead we're consistently told that the Lord chooses things that are humble, lowly, and even despised when he makes himself known.

So now comes the great day Simeon has been waiting for. We're told that he came in the Spirit into the temple. It's the third time in the passage the Holy Spirit is mentioned by name, which is a biblical way of underscoring a truth. It says “Don't miss this: what's going on here is the work of the Spirit of God.” And it's telling us that Simeon knows this: that God has led him here to the Temple at this moment so that he can finally see what has been promised to him.

Picture him then, surveying the hundreds of people coming and going. The Temple is a big and busy place. There are lines of people waiting to offer sacrifices for dozens of different things. On various courts there's teaching going on, and lots of arguing among the religious scholars. Other places people are praying and chanting psalms. “Where is this mass of humanity and organized chaos will I see him?” Simeon must wonder. “Will he be the wisest rabbi teaching on Solomon's court? Will he appear in kingly splendor?” And then the Spirit

shows him. That poor couple over there, the young mother holding a tiny baby, and the father handing over two small birds to the priest, who quickly cuts their throats and drips their blood into a bowl.

So *this* is what Simeon has been waiting for. Not quite what he was expecting; but he is overjoyed nevertheless. He dare not interrupt the ceremony as they offer their sacrifice for Jesus, but as the holy couple comes away Simeon moves forward to intercept them. In Joseph's hands are the limp, blood stained birds used to redeem Jesus. They will serve again as the family's meager supper. But it's what Mary holds in her arms that interests Simeon. He extends his hands before her with eager expectation. "May I?" his eyes inquire. First time parents tend to be a bit over protective with their new babies. They don't usually hand them over to strangers. But there's something about this old man that tells Mary it's okay. She consents.

Praising and thanking the Lord, Simeon gently lifts the infant Jesus from her arms. He peers intently into the baby's face, beholding him with rapt wonder. And I've got to believe that he's chuckling to himself over what he perceives to be the trick the Lord played on him. "Of course: I was expecting a wise king and conquering hero. But even heroes have to grow up. They start their lives as weak and helpless babies just like everyone else."

Simeon then intones the words of the hymn we call the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon is saying that he can die a happy man now: God has kept his promise and shown to him the Savior of the world. More than that, speaking in the Spirit he announces that this child is no less than the Lord himself: that's what the Light for the Gentiles and the Glory of Israel is. Interestingly, Simeon says this revelation is before all people; but it's obvious that not everyone who looks at it really sees it. And that's clear: the Temple is full of people who have come to worship the Lord; but only Simeon sees him there. And by the revelation given to him and his speaking about it, an old woman named Anna also comes to know and understand who Jesus is. At that point she too is in the Spirit – the Spirit she receives through the word of Simeon. Then she goes to speak to others who were waiting for the Redeemer to appear. We can presume that some of them also, by the Spirit, came to believe. That is, after all, how the Spirit operates: always through the spoken Word of God. It's the means he uses to enter people and create saving faith in Jesus in their hearts.

But returning to the song of Simeon, you probably recognize these as the words we sing after receiving Holy Communion. There's a reason for that. In repeating his words we are placing ourselves in his sandals. By the illumination of the Spirit, he was given to see in a tiny baby the Lord God and the Savior of the world. Likewise, by the illumination of the Spirit, we are given to see in bread and wine the same Savior who died to redeem us. He didn't look like a Savior when Simeon saw him. He didn't look like a Savior when he was dying on the cross. Nor does a wafer of bread and a sip of wine look like the body and blood of Jesus our Redeemer. But when, like Simeon, we come into the Temple of God in the Spirit, we are given to see with the heart what the eye cannot detect. And seeing our salvation in Jesus, we too can live out and finally depart this life in peace knowing that the Lord has truly kept his Word.

Therefore we pray that the Lord would continue to pour out his Holy Spirit upon us that we may see and believe in the salvation he has prepared for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!