

The thing I loved about our Christmas services and made them so special, was the fact that there were several families present consisting of three or even four generations. We had the joy of seeing two toddlers merrily crawling across the aisle to say hello to each other, until a mother and grandmother took action to intervene. Sitting within a few rows of each other was a babe in arms only a few weeks old and someone I know is closing in on her centenary. An intergenerational setting if ever there was one.

Today we hear of another intergenerational setting as we return for the final act in the Christmas story when Mary, Joseph and the 6-week-old baby Jesus travel the 5 or so miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem where the Temple was located.

Their purpose in doing so was to comply with the religious law which required the first-born male of every Jewish family to be dedicated to God in the Temple.

And in doing so they introduce us to the forgotten man of the Christmas story, Simeon.

Luke tells us in verse 25 that he was righteous and devout and significantly the Holy Spirit was upon him. That tells us that this final scene is being directed by the Holy Spirit. And when Jesus is brought into the temple Simeon recognizes Jesus for what he is...the Lord's Christ.

We know nothing about Simeon other than what Luke tells us. We don't know how long he has been waiting in the Temple. We don't know how old he is. We don't know what he did for a living...but I see him very much as an older man.

Many commentators suggest that Simeon expected to die after he had seen the Messiah, the Lord's Christ – that this was to be the final role he was called to by the Holy Spirit. This would make sense of his words 'as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace'. Whether or not he expected to die soon, the peace that resulted from that embrace changed everything. But equally, in the

Jewish culture of the day, the older generation were respected for the wisdom they possessed. Simeon has been in communion with God, favoured by God and when he spoke, people will have listened; indeed, we are told that Mary and Joseph marveled at what he said.

Simeon continued, 'My eyes have seen your salvation' To see Jesus is to see God's salvation. They are inseparable. Maybe Simeon is telling us there is joy, even in the face of death, when one has seen the source of life. Simeon's job as a sentinel for the Messiah may or may not be done, but he gives us a wonderful example of what it is to be a faithful servant who is at home in God's purpose and plan.

And when Simeon holds the baby Jesus, he cannot contain his excitement and isn't that a wonderful attitude which carries right through to today? He is an example for each and every one of us to follow; whatever or whenever we speak about God, we should be enthusiastic, not defensive.

Simeon also offers us another exciting and faith defining moment in his prophecy that Jesus would be *a light for revelation to the Gentiles*. Not just the people of Israel, but all people. Simeon is giving voice to the fact that Jesus is the light by which you and I can seek salvation; He is not only the light of the whole world, as Jesus will say in his own words later in life, he is the way, the truth and the life.

But Simeon's prophecy is not all light and joy; there is also a note of foreboding warning Mary that she will feel a mother's pain as she watches her son go his own way and suffer rejection. He tells her a sword will pierce through her own soul as well, mirroring, many say, the spear thrust through Jesus' side when he is on the cross.

But the sword also reflects the pain anyone who identifies with Jesus feels as the world rejects what Jesus has to offer. Simeon's remark to Mary is an aside, but an

important one, since it shows that identifying with Jesus has painful, personal consequences and this is never so true today as the persecuted Christians in China, Korea, India and many Muslim led countries can confirm.

Simeon is often overlooked when we consider the story of Christ's birth. But he stands as a great example for us all. His message is one of blessing and revelation; of joy and foreboding; of patience and faithfulness.

Christ's parents marveled at what he said; perhaps that is why Simeon's words which have become known to us as the Nunc Dimittis has been an integral part of our Christian liturgy for so long.

Simeon's thanksgiving to God tells us that the salvation to be found in Jesus is for everyone; it is universal. But Simeon's warning to Mary confirms that whilst salvation is offered to everyone not all will accept; here is our challenge two thousand years on.

Are we willing to accept Jesus at the centre of our lives; to follow him by both word and deed, to accept that salvation can only be achieved by submitting to Him by recognizing that He died on the cross so that we might be saved? After all that is what we affirm each week in the creed.

Now for the million-pound question. How best can we live out what we say?

Answers on a post card will be accepted, or better still why not invite Jon or I for a coffee to discuss?

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 30 Jan 2022