

Charles Simeon

Sermon at King's College Chapel, Cambridge, Sunday 15 Nov 2015

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Colossians 1:3-12 and Luke 2:25-38

Near the north door of this chapel, set into the floor, are two initials: CS. Charles Simeon was buried in a vault under there in 1836. The funeral procession brought Cambridge to a standstill, both Town and Gown. Shops were closed and classes were suspended.

Why did so many turn out to pay their last respects? For 54 years, Simeon was Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, and a fellow of this College. He is seen as the father of evangelical Anglicanism, who encouraged zealous young converts to remain loyal to the Established Church. Through his generosity, Simeon Trustees have been appointing evangelical clergy to significant parishes ever since.

Simeon's rootedness and *stabilitas* in one place, over so many years, had ramifications throughout the world.

A young student arriving in Cambridge from Eton, Simeon was deeply conscious of his own sin before God, as he prepared for Holy Communion. He came to faith in Jesus Christ in this college on Easter Day 1779. He wrote later that he realised:

'I can transfer all my guilt to Another! I will not bear them on my soul a moment longer...Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus; and on the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; on the Thursday that hope increased; on the Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday morning, Easter Day, April 4th, I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips, "Jesus Christ is risen today! Halleluah! Hallelujah!" From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul, and at the Lord's table in our Chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.

In 1782 he was made a fellow of King's College, ordained deacon and appointed a curate at Holy Trinity Church. He was priested the following year.

For his last 24 years, he lived in the spectacular rooms above what is known as the 'Jumbo Arch' of the Gibbs Building. It has semi-circular, 'Diocletian' windows, facing both King's Parade and the river. Have a look

as you come out of chapel today. Simeon was very generous. He gave a lot of money away at home and abroad, to the poor in Cambridge (and surrounding villages) and to the Church Missionary Society, he helped found in 1799.

In those rooms above the Jumbo Arch, over tea, Simeon in effect formed a mini theological college, leading sermon classes and discussion parties. Thus he became a mentor to hundreds of Cambridge students and inspired many of them to be priests and missionaries, such as Henry Martyn, of St John's College, the pioneer bible translator in India and Persia, who died tragically at the age of 31, and Samuel Marsden, of Magdalene College, the CMS pioneer in New Zealand.

A portrait, which Simeon had commissioned of Henry Martyn, hung above the fireplace in those rooms. Hugh Evan Hopkins, Simeon's biographer, wrote:

Years afterwards, looking at that picture, Simeon would say to his guests 'There! See that blessed man! What an expression of countenance! No one looks at me as he does – and he never takes his eyes off me; and seems always to be saying, "Be serious – be in earnest – Don't trifle – don't trifle." And I won't trifle – I won't trifle.'

Hugh Evan Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977) p 149.

Simeon was also a great letter writer. In the archives of Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge, I read a letter which he wrote to Charles Grant, the Director of the East India Company, and a fellow founder of CMS, dated 18 October 1814:

My dear Sir, Is there a chaplaincy to Bombay? If there be one, I have some hope of a good one for that settlement – But till I have your answer I cannot take any further steps in relation to it.

And he added as a post script:

Mr. Martyn's Persian Testament is safe in Petersburg. The King of Persia admires it much, and has copied it for himself, and had it copied for some of his friends and written a Recommendation of it with his own hand and seal. A copy of it is taken by the Bible Society at Petersburg in order to be put to the press immediately – Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

In 1998, when I was lecturing in Cambridge, I remember looking at that 'Jumbo Arch' and pondering the generous rich man who used to live above it. I thought that it was like the eye of a needle. It needed a camel to go through it to celebrate Simeon and CMS. That surprising vision led to an unusual celebration on CMS's bicentenary.

Joseph Galgalo, a Kenyan Cambridge PhD student of theology, and I walked from Oxford to Cambridge with a camel – a real camel - over six days in June 1999. We led it, with the Vice-Chancellor, the Provost of King's, the Master of John's and the Bishop of Ely, through that archway and later into Great St Mary's.

Simeon was a brilliant expository preacher, as he opened up the Scriptures in his sermons. He was conscious of the importance of the preacher not obscuring the attractiveness of his Lord. He had carved in the pulpit at Holy Trinity the words of the Greeks in John's Gospel: 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. He wrote that his three aims in sermons were to 'humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour and promote holiness'.

Ridley Hall's archives hold Simeon's Greek New Testament. In it, he marked his initials, CS, in the margin of the story of Simeon in the Temple, indicating his identification.

In that Gospel reading today, in Luke chapter 2, we see the Holy Spirit setting up an encounter of good news. The Spirit is upon Simeon (v. 25), has revealed the extraordinary promise to him (v. 26) and has led him into the temple at this particular time (v. 27). The desire of his heart, the consolation of Israel, is a rabbinic term and echoes the opening words of Isaiah 40 – 'Comfort, comfort my people' – which, until now, he may well have thought of in terms of liberation from the Romans.

Simeon's whole life of devotion is crowned by taking the infant King in his arms. Here in this bundle is the promised yet startling Messiah. Everything – all his prayers and longing, study of the Scriptures and delight in God – has led up to this point, in this place.

He holds the good news. He exults in scriptural words of blessing which have become familiar as the Nunc Dimittis, sung in this chapel at Evensong over the centuries. Verse 30 echoes the words of Isaiah 52:10 'and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.' Verses 31 and 32 quote Isaiah 49:61, 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' This verse in Isaiah is the focus of a glorious breakthrough in the Hebrew Scripture's theology of mission: light to the Gentiles. Luke, the Gentile writer of this Gospel, rejoices in this theme.

Yet, there is light and shadow. Simeon says to Mary that her son will be the centre of controversy (which echoes Isaiah 8:14) and many in Israel will be humiliated before being raised. The phrase 'fall and rise' seems to refer to the same, not different, people and will include the disciples. Israel's glory, surprisingly, will come through her Representative – this baby when he grows up – suffering. (v. 35).

So, today, we give thanks for the extraordinary life of another Simeon, which was centred on Jesus Christ, King's College and Holy Trinity Church. As we move forward to receive Holy Communion today, may we follow his example of being humbled as sinners, of exalting the Saviour and of aiming for lives of holiness.