A Sermon in King’s College Chapel

Candlemas

What are we to make of Simeon – the old man who took Jesus in his arms, blessed God and then recited the poem we now call the Nunc dimittis? The Bible tells us that he was ‘just’ and ‘devout’. This, however, is not what is most interesting about him.

Simeon was a man of intuition. He had the knack of being in the right place at the right time; of seeing things that were not obvious and were not explained. Simeon was a man who looked and saw - and understood what he saw.

He was not a man of argument or controversy, not a man of thought or over-thinking; and certainly not one who rushed about trying, if possible, to be in two places at the same time. Simeon was a man of simplicity and a man of prayer.

His poem gives us a lovely, if surprising, model of prayer in that it begins with personal desire: ‘Lord let me now depart in peace’.

True holiness, spirituality that has integrity, can, should and must be straightforward about personal desire. True prayer is honest. It is not, ‘Lord make me want the things I should want’ but, ‘Lord, what I really want is this’.

The rest of Simeon’s poem is about the light and glory of God as revealed to the world through the Christ-child. But the most memorable words of Simeon are not those of his poem, but those he whispered to Mary: ‘yea, a sword shall pierce though thine own soul also’.
What extraordinary words to say to a poor young mother who is trying to do the right religious thing! But Simeon was a man of intuition and prayer. He looked and saw; he saw and understood. He could see the glory of God in a tender child and a loving family. He could feel the humility of God right there, and while he himself was fulfilled by what he felt, he rightly sensed that the powers that be would not like it at all. Simeon knew that his gentle, dignified, vulnerable presentation of eternal loving-kindness would not be met by grace and gratitude, but by fear and hostility.

We honour Mary as the mother of God, but in this reading we should also honour her as her son’s first disciple. For the sword that pierces her heart will also pierce the heart of all who, like her, love the Lord Jesus and seek to follow him.

Christmas is lovely, and Candlemas is a beautiful occasion: having heard the words of Simeon we should be in no doubt about who the child is, or what glory is like, and our souls should rejoice. But nor should we be in any doubt about what is in store for us is we decide to walk in this light, seeing and accepting God’s love and salvation in Christ.

Christmas has been and gone and Simeon have now given us a glimpse of the cross on the horizon of the future. The journey towards Easter begins here with holy old Simeon. He will depart, but we must make our way forward.

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_Luke 2. 22-40_

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