

Cork Scripture Group



Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.

Psalm 119:105

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'Seasons of Hope: Biblical Perspectives on Hope'

Notes on the Presentation of the Lord (Luke 2:22-38)

Marian Mortell



The Presentation in the Temple

The story of the Presentation takes place in the Temple, the holiest place for the people of Israel and also their place of worship. Mary and Joseph, who are faithful Jews, come here to fulfil the two rituals of purification of the new mother and consecration of the baby. This focus on faithfulness to the Law situates Mary and Joseph among the people of God in the Old Testament. This particular passage draws very strongly on Deutero-Isaiah's understanding of God, the God of the covenant who brings deliverance, salvation and light to the nations. So, as the passage begins, there is already a sense of hope in the God of the covenant and a sense of expectation.

Even though Luke confuses the actual ceremonies of the purification of the mother and the consecration/redemption of the first born male, he has a definite purpose in mind. He wants to show that Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple to present him to the Lord. This is a reminder of the story of Hannah who brings Samuel to the sanctuary and gives him over to serve the Lord for as long as he lives (1 Sam 1:28). When the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, he told her that the child would be holy (1:35) and now here, when he is presented to the Lord, “he is designated as holy to the Lord” (2:23).

Introducing Simeon

The scene changes now and we are introduced to Simeon. Almost every word that is used about him carries layers of meaning.

- He is described as devout and, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, is upright/righteous and therefore typical of the faithful people of the Old Testament.
- He is waiting for, or looking forward to, the consolation of Israel. This ‘looking forward’ signifies hope and is used of the people to whom Anna speaks and also of Joseph of Arimathea, who is described as looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God as he organises the burial of Jesus’ body.
- Simeon is looking forward to the consolation of Israel. This is a reminder of Deutero-Isaiah, who says “console my people, console them,” (Is 40:1) and then promises that the Lord will always be with his people (Is 43:5). Isaiah sees this consolation as God’s intervention in human affairs but Simeon now concentrates it on the coming of the Messiah in the form of Jesus. With his arrival, Simeon is looking forward to an era of peace under the dominion of God.
- Finally, we are told that the Spirit rests on Simeon, signalling that he is a prophet. This role is emphasised even more when the Holy Spirit reveals to him that he will see the Lord’s Messiah and guides him to the Temple.

Simeon’s Prayer

As Simeon receives the child Jesus into his arms from his parents, he realises that he is meeting the Messiah, the saviour, the one who is the consolation of Israel. His hope has been fulfilled.

Simeon’s prayer is primarily a prayer of praise. He can now be dismissed in peace. Since the terms ‘master’ and ‘slave’ are used, it can mean that he has completed his service for his master, the Lord Yahweh, by recognising the Messiah and he can go peacefully to his death now that he has seen him. He has seen Jesus, the saviour sent by the Lord. His encounter with Jesus is an encounter with the salvation of God and is a reminder of Is 45:5: “Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Luke’s theology of salvation is different to that of the other synoptic gospel writers. He tells us that *salvation is here now* and has arrived with the birth of Jesus. So in Luke we are told by the angels that a saviour is born *this day* (2:11). He also says that ‘the kingdom of God *has*

come to you' (11:20) and *'the kingdom of God is among you'* (17:21). As Simeon holds the child and prays over him, he announces that he has seen God's salvation incarnate in the child in his arms. Salvation has arrived with the birth of Jesus.

God as a light who transforms, has already been used as a metaphor in Zechariah's prayer when he announces that God will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:79). Now however, Simeon expands this light to take in both the people of Israel and the Gentiles. He draws heavily again on Deutero-Isaiah who talks of light going from Jerusalem out to the ends of the earth (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 52:10) and also of the servant of the Lord bringing that light ("I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" Isa 49:6).

There is an important difference, however, between Deutero-Isaiah and Simeon as, in Deutero-Isaiah, the light begins in Jerusalem with the Chosen People and is spread from them to the ends of the earth. In Simeon's prayer he states that it is being offered equally to the people of Israel and Gentiles. This is Luke stressing that Jesus, the saviour, has come to all people and not just the people of Israel. He, therefore, declares Christianity a universal religion.

We must remember that Luke's Gospel does not have the visit of the Magi (representing people from all nations), which is found only in Matthew's Gospel. Instead, here in the Infancy Narrative, Luke explains his message of universality first when the angels bring "good news for all the people" at the birth of Jesus (2:10) and then in Simeon's prayer, when he declares that salvation has come to both Jew and Gentile.

A Sign of Division

Having praised God, Simeon now turns to the parents and blesses them. Readers would expect the continuation of this positive sense of hope and expectation that has been developed up to now. Instead, Simeon's oracle begins with a blessing, but then a shadow is cast over the scene.

He first says that the child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel. Going back to Deutero-Isaiah, on which so much of this passage is based, it is a reminder of the fall of Israel in exile and then its return thanks to the promise of Yahweh to its own land. Luke uses the concept of reversal regularly throughout his Gospel to show the transformation that is brought about by the Gospel values that Jesus proclaims. It applies in particular to social upheaval, the reversal of the powerful and the lowly. Mary's Magnificat describes the powerful who are brought down while the lowly are raised and the hungry who are fed while the rich are sent away empty (1:52-53). The beatitudes and woes bless the disadvantaged and excluded but predict woe to the insiders and rich who have already had their fill (6:20-26). This reversal of values is summed up in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (18:9-14).

However, it is not all positive as Simeon declares that Jesus' ministry will not be an easy one. He will be a sign that will be opposed and this can be seen throughout his ministry. From his earliest preaching in Galilee he is rejected, first by his own people at the synagogue in

Nazareth (4:16-30), and then frequently by the Pharisees (5: 17-26; 6:1-6 etc.). As he begins the journey to Jerusalem, he warns his followers that he will be a cause of division and following him will not be an easy path (12:49-53). As he continues the journey, the opposition increases and his enemies begin to plot his death (11:53, 13:31; 19:47; 22:2 etc.).

Simeon's ambiguous statement that "the thoughts of many will be revealed" is nearly always used in a negative sense in this Gospel. Examples of this negativity include the Pharisees who are horrified when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic (5:21-22), those who object when he cures the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (6:8), Simon the Pharisee who thinks that Jesus is not a prophet because he associates with a woman who is known as a sinner (7: 39) and even his own followers who argue about who is the greatest (9:46-47) when he has just predicted his passion and death. So despite the wonderful news of the coming of the saviour, this passage warns of a shadow over his ministry that results eventually in his passion and death.

Simeon's final message to Mary reminds her that a sword will pierce her soul too. The word that is used here means more than spiritual soul and might be better explained as her whole earthly being, physical, emotional and spiritual. Different commentators offer the following views about its meaning.

- The word 'too' is a reminder that both she and her son will suffer.
- It is a reminder of her sorrow because of the suffering and rejection that her son will endure throughout his entire life.
- Some commentators think of it in terms of her son's death when she will suffer as she watches the crucifixion. However, there is no mention of Mary being present at the crucifixion in Luke's Gospel. It is only in John's Gospel that Mary is described as being at the foot of the cross.
- If we confine ourselves to Luke's Gospel, the last time we meet Mary is when she arrives with his family to see him, but they are unable to reach him because of the crowd. When Jesus is told about this, he doesn't go out to meet them but redefines his family in terms of those who hear the word of God and do it (8:19-21). Even though Mary is an example of someone who hears the word of God and does it, it must have been difficult for her to subordinate her close family ties to him to encompass this broader definition of family.

Introducing Anna

The passage finishes with the introduction of Anna. In a few short sentences, we learn a lot about her. The name Anna is another form of 'Hannah,' the mother of Samuel, who presented her son to the Lord in a similar manner to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (1 Sam 1:24-28). Anna is the only person, other than Jesus, who is called a prophet in Luke's Gospel. Her prophetic credentials are further emphasised when she is called the daughter of Phanuel as the name means 'one who has seen the face of God.' In the Old Testament, people like Moses were called prophets because they had seen the face of God. She is of the tribe of Asher, a northern tribe where the great prophet, Elijah based his preaching. So, while we presume that Simeon is a prophet because the Holy Spirit rests on him, we are told explicitly that Anna is one.

She was married for seven years and widowed for 84. 84 is the product of seven and twelve and these two numbers are of great significance in Jewish thought: seven is a well known

expression of abundance and twelve expresses perfection. So she is presented as a figure of wisdom and integrity when she meets the family. As a widow, she is one of the *anawim*, the poor ones who could not rely on themselves but put their trust completely in Yahweh. It is also likely that she is materially poor as, other than their dowries which were returned to them when their husbands died, widows were not entitled to anything else and had to depend on their nearest male relative to support them. As she waits in hope for the coming of the Messiah, she spends day and night in the Temple, fasting and praying.

We do not get a detailed description of Anna's meeting with the child and we do not hear her actual words. However, we are told that her first reaction is to continuously praise God, which is similar to Simeon's reaction. While Simeon follows that by speaking directly to the parents, Anna goes further and proclaims the news about the child publicly to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Between the two of them, Simeon and Anna express the hope of the people waiting for the coming of the Messiah. As stated in Isaiah 52:9 (for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem), they are waiting for the two key elements of the Messiah's coming, the consoling or comfort of Israel and its redemption. Both of them show how to respond in hope, by first praising God and then speaking about him, Simeon to the parents and Anna to all who will listen. By showing the response of both Simeon and Anna, Luke not only points out that the good news is equally relevant to both men and women, but also shows that by combining their reactions we get a fuller picture of how to respond to the Lord. It is a pity that quite often the section on Anna is excluded in Gospel readings in the liturgy as it is considered by many to be simply repetition of Simeon's message.

A Message of Hope

This passage carries the Messianic hope of the people of Israel in the expectant waiting of Simeon and Anna. This is shown in their faithfulness to the Law, to their prayer and praise of God as well as Anna's fasting. This waiting goes from hope to fulfilment when they encounter the Messiah in the person of Jesus. Since the good news must always be shared, Anna then proclaims it to all who are waiting for the redemption of Israel.

All are welcome

This passage also shows that all are welcome in God's kingdom.

- There is the example of Simeon and Anna who represent both men and women.
- Mary and Joseph are poor people who can only offer two pigeons or two turtle doves as they cannot afford the offering of a lamb for the Temple sacrifice. Yet they are chosen as Jesus' parents. As a widow, Anna is another of the poor and disadvantaged and yet she is the prophet who proclaims the Lord to all.
- There are no longer any outsiders. In his prayer, Simeon declares that the Lord had come to all, Gentiles as well as the Lord's chosen people. All are welcome in the new Kingdom of God that will be proclaimed by Jesus in his ministry.

- In our own society where elderly people are often not valued as they should be, it is worth noting that it is Simeon and Anna, two elderly people, who recognise Jesus and declare that the Messiah has come offering comfort and redemption.

Waiting in Hope

The characters in this passage teach us how to look forward in hope.

We hear very little about Mary in this particular passage, but by presenting her son in the Temple, she signals the fulfilment of the expectation of those who are waiting for the coming of the saviour. The last mention we have of Mary in this Gospel is when Jesus declares that his new family of faith consists of those who hear the word of God and do it (8:21). This is Mary's consistent response to the Lord. Her story is one of listening to God's word, accepting it, pondering on its meaning and putting it into practice.

Both Simeon and Anna look forward in hope, recognise the Messiah, respond by praising God and speaking about the Messiah, Simeon to the parents and Anna to everyone who will listen.

To sum up, these three characters show the key steps in responding as a hopeful people.

- Listening to the Word of God – Mary listens to the message of the Lord brought to her by the angel (1:26-37)
- Accepting it and responding – Mary accepts the message (Let it be done onto me according to thy word (1:38)
- Pondering on its meaning – after the visit of the shepherds (2:19), after the finding in the Temple (2:51)
- Responding first by praising God – Mary in the Magnificat (2:47-49), both Simeon and Anna after they first encounter Jesus (2:28, 38)
- Putting God's message into practice – Mary in all of her actions, beginning with the visitation (1: 39), Simeon and Anna by their lives as faithful Jews
- Proclaiming the message to all – Anna to all who will listen to her (2:38).

Bibliography

To further explore Luke's Gospel, here are some suggested commentaries:

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