

# First Sunday after Christmas Day

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## Introduction

The peculiar circumstances of Jesus birth in Bethlehem, were due to imperial decree that a census should be taken. Having obeyed the demands of the secular authorities, now the Holy Family visit the Temple to fulfill their religious obligations. Just as the offerings of the first fruits of harvest were an acknowledgement that all good gifts come from God, so every first-born male was designated as holy to the Lord, to signify that every person's primary calling is to be found in God's service.

In today's Gospel, Simeon and Anna recognise that the long-held hopes of God's salvation were to be fulfilled in the child who had just met in the Temple.

At the heart of this celebration there is also the promise of conflict and personal suffering. When God's love encounters human sinfulness there is conflict and suffering – it can't be avoided. Simeon's vision of salvation is not only realistic and focused, it is also generous and inclusive, and the prediction that God's plan of salvation will result in conflict, great suffering and personal loss.

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## Text

### Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the

Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

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## Comment

This reading, coming just two after Christmas reflects the bitter/sweet emotions we have recently experience due to the pandemic. Even in a secular world, Christmas celebrations are much more than a consumer-fest. Christmas is the occasion, more than any other time during the year, when families want to be together. Over time families create their own rituals, traditions and favourite activities that put their unique stamp on Christmas – it’s not only children who look forward to Christmas!

In reality, the celebrations can be a let down, conflict can destroy the mirage of peace and goodwill, and those without home and family can look on despairingly.

Christmas 2020 has been problematic for most of us. What was longed and hoped for at Christmas was only partially delivered; families have not been able to meet as usual and loneliness and isolation was the experience of many more people than usual.

As we take a little time to look at this passage we can see that the reality of human experience is always complex. In this passage we see the fulfillment of a promise of salvation and the forboding of disaster. Such is the realism of the Gospel story.

Jesus family were poor. They couldn’t afford a Lamb to be brought to the Temple as a sacrifice and had to opt for the concession for the poor, two turtledoves or two pigeons. They shared the lot of many at that time, living under a severe régime of occupation by a foreign power. The constant frustration and humiliation experienced by so many would have given a sense desperation that God’s promise of Salvation should be fulfilled.

In contrast to the popular fervour that led some to interpret God’s salvation in nationalistic and political terms, Simeon portrays a contrasting perspective. Simeon’s vision is not only realistic and focussed, it is also generous and inclusive.

Simeon looked for the “consolation” of Israel. The use of ‘consolation’ is beautiful here. It speaks of a loving relationship where one party is suffering and the other soothes the pain – it points to a beautiful metaphor of God’s relationship with God’s people.

The Gospel writer describes Simeon as someone on whom the Spirit rested. That sense of fellowship with God may be why Simeon exhibited remarkable openness. Intuitively he felt the urge to visit the Temple, and he took it as the Spirit’s guidance. It just so happened (!) that Jesus family was arriving there at the same time. Simeon not only sees the baby, but sees the significance of the tiny life that he was holding in his arms, and in a flood of words that summed up Simeon’s thoughts and prayers for countless years he utters the words of what we know now as the Nunc Dimittis.

While the general population may have wished for liberation from the Romans, Simeon sees God’s salvation encompassing the globe, not only Israel but the Gentiles will see God’s salvation.

How often in conflict our aim is to win an advantage over our foe. But Simeon’s see that God is inclusive and not partisan. God’s way is win – win. Salvation is for all the world. Simeon is in that tradition that sees Salvation in the context of the promise given to Abraham, that through his descendants all the nations of the world would be blessed. This generosity, this inclusiveness, may I suggest, is more than human calculation, it is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit. The glory of Israel will be made real in so far as Israel is a means of blessing to the nations. This was Simeon’s vision of Jesus’ life and work. And Jesus’ parents were amazed!

Simeon then blesses Jesus’ parents. But with the blessing comes words of caution, predicting, conflict, division, opposition. (v 34) and for Mary, personal loss and suffering.

How can we see this as a ‘blessing’ – it is a ‘mixed blessing’ at least!

It seems as if Simeon’s blessing was anything but sugar-coating reality, papering over the cracks with blind optimism and sentimental good humour. Simeon’s blessing faces the reality that where the love of God meets the sinfulness of human kind, suffering is the inevitable consequence. The blessing comes in knowing that the path God has chosen, is to deal with the suffering of the world by accompanying those who suffer, as One who suffers with us.

Another remarkable person, Anna, who had experienced tremendous loss, but refused to give in to bitterness and resentment and found meaning and fulfillment in prayer and fasting night and day! She was a person of faith, and hope, looking forward to a better future. She too was open to perceive the significance of this child, and shared her joy at this discovery with all those who were looking for the ‘redemption of Jerusalem’

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## Response

I invite you to reflect on your hopes and expectations for Christmas 2020? In what ways were those hopes compromised through the pandemic?

What have learnt from your experience of the pandemic about your expectations of

God's promised salvation?

How have you learnt to live in the "Already/Not Yet" dimensions of God's salvation. What does God's salvation mean for you, now in the present context? And for the future?

Simeon is described as someone upon whom the Spirit "rested". In your experience have you also recognised such a person? How would you describe such a person's attitudes and demeanor? Are you called to be such a person?

Anna had lost so much, yet rather than being bitter or resentful she found fulfillment in fasting and prayer. In your experience, or perhaps the experience of people you know, what enables a person to resist bitterness of spirit after great loss?

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## Prayer

God, in caring for your creation

You chose to accompany us and share our suffering.

May we love others generously

reflecting Your inclusive salvation.