

Christmas 1B (12/28/08 – *The Blessing of the Blessed One & the Holy Innocents*)

On this *First Sunday after Christmas*, we continue in LUKE’S account of the birth and infancy of our Lord Jesus Christ. The *Holy Gospel* for today tells the story of the time when baby Jesus was presented in the Temple. This event, called *The Presentation of Our Lord*, serves as a predictor ... a foreshadowing ... of things to come. In it we discover what this little Baby came to do ... and what that means **for us** – indeed, for the world.

This is now the fortieth day after Jesus’ birth. In obedience to Jewish Law, Mary and Joseph take the Baby to the Temple in Jerusalem. Because this Child is the Firstborn Son, they are to present Him to the Lord – consecrate and dedicate Him to the Lord’s service. While there, they encounter Simeon and Anna – whom God has prepared to recognize the Infant Messiah. These two saints have been on the Lord’s “waiting list” for a long time. Both have been waiting for God to fulfill His promises to His people. Simeon’s has been waiting for *the consolation of Israel* [2.25] ... Anna was looking forward to *the redemption of Jerusalem* [2.38].

The consolation of Israel ... the redemption of Jerusalem – these are the same thing, really. *Redemption* means ‘to set someone free from bondage by means of paying a price.’ And *consolation* means ‘comfort, encouragement, help for someone in distress or sorrow.’ God’s promise that He would redeem His people was also the promise of their consolation. That’s what we heard in Isaiah’s famous prophecy near the beginning of *Advent*: “*Comfort, comfort my people,*” says your God. “*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her iniquity is pardoned.*” [40.1] This comfort and consolation are based on the Lord redeeming His people ... on setting them free from the results of their sins. These were the promises that Simeon and Anna were waiting to see fulfilled. They were waiting – looking for – God’s redemption and consolation.

And what about us? Are we in need of this redemption and consolation? Certainly! In fact, the whole human race lies in bondage, in need of being set free. Lost and condemned, because of our sin, we all are in bondage to death – a slavery we cannot escape by our own power. Who will liberate us from this bondage? We are in need of redemption. And while we are bound in this bondage to death, we live in a world subject to decay and corruption, sickness and sadness and sorrow. Thus, all people everywhere are in need of consolation – living as we do in this vale of tears. How we long for words of comfort and refreshment and hope! Life can be so discouraging. We are dragged down by the wrongs that others do against us ... and especially by our own misdeeds. We need to be lifted up; we need encouragement. So redemption and consolation? Yes! Where can we find them?

We find them ... redemption and consolation ... in the same place Simeon and Anna found them – in the Person of the Christ Child. When Simeon took that Baby in

his arms, he praised God in words that later entered the liturgy as the canticle we sing at the end of the Divine Service – the *NUNC DIMITTIS*. Simeon says: ***Sovereign Lord, according to Your Word, You now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your Salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people, a Light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel.*** [2.29-32]

Do you hear what Simeon is saying? The time of waiting is over! The time of expectation and longing for the fulfillment of God's promise is now at an end. The answer is there in Simeon's arms, as he holds the little Baby. Promise fulfilled – really, **promises** fulfilled – both the promise of consolation to Israel and the promise to Simeon that he would live to see the Christ. Simeon is praising God for fulfilling His promises. He uses the image of a master dismissing a slave: “Lord, now You dismiss Your servant in peace.” It is like a soldier assigned to watch for reinforcements, waiting dutifully at his post in anxious expectation; and when the cavalry finally comes over the hill, he is overjoyed ... the promised reinforcements have arrived ... his time of duty is over! “Sir, the help has arrived! Now you can dismiss me from my post.” That's the sense of joy and relief that Simeon is experiencing.

And Simeon gives the reason for his joy: ***For my eyes have seen Your Salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people.*** He says this as he looks at the Baby in his arms. For that little Child **is** God's Salvation ... in the Flesh – come to save us from the eternal death that our sins deserve ... come to save us for God and for the eternal life waiting for us in heaven.

My eyes have seen Your Salvation, Simeon says. Those tired old eyes saw God's Salvation come in the Flesh of the Infant Jesus. How did he know? What told him, “This is the one”? All Simeon saw was a couple with a small Baby in the Temple – nothing unusual ... there must have been any number that day. But the Lord causes Simeon to single out this particular couple and this particular Child. A remarkable thing, that Simeon should know that this Baby is the Christ, the promised Deliverer. For there was nothing at all to distinguish Baby Jesus from other babies. It's not like He went around with a halo on His head (despite the paintings) ... or neon arrows pointing to Him. No, it took more than ordinary eyesight to recognize this ordinary-looking Child as the Savior sent from God. It took the eyes of faith – eyes opened by the Holy Spirit. And you and I can thank God that we too have been given those eyes of faith, “Simeon eyes,” eyes that see God's salvation at work in things that do not look so spectacular – things like a pastor preaching a sermon or speaking the words of absolution, like the water washing over a baby being baptized, or the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Nothing special according to appearance, but according to God's promise, these are the very means of God's grace. And just as the Lord opened the eyes of Simeon, so He opens our eyes to see His salvation in the unspectacular places He chooses.

So here in the *NUNC DIMITTIS*, Simeon essentially says: *Lord, now I'm ready to go. Your promise has been fulfilled. My own eyes now have seen Your Salvation.* Looking at that little Baby, Simeon was seeing the Christ, the Messiah, the One Who would bring consolation to Israel ... the world. Likewise Anna, too, thanked God and *spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.* [2.38] So in this Child is the redemption ... in Him is the consolation. In the Person of Jesus Christ – and in Him alone – are the freedom and the comfort that all people need.

But there's one thing more. How would He do it? How would this little Baby be the fulfillment of God's promises? How would He bring about the promised redemption and consolation? We said this event – *The Presentation of Our Lord* – was a predictor ... a foreshadowing of things to come. And so it is. Because in it we see a preview of just how this little Child would grow up to make redemption for us. Listen to Simeon's words to Mary: *Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also) so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.* [2.34-35]

Little Baby Jesus would grow up and face a lot of opposition. Even as an Infant, Herod tries to get rid of Him ... and in the process causes the fall of many innocent Israelite infants – *The Holy Innocents, Martyrs* as they are called. People would speak against Him and reject Him. He would be *a sign that is opposed*. And Mary would experience grief in her own soul because of this. Here in these words of Simeon, we see the shadow of the Cross creeping into the picture – so early. The happiness of this day would be dimmed with sorrow at some future point. This prophecy is a predictor of the darkness that would come over the land when the Prince of Glory would be crucified.

But in the great paradox that is the Cross, it would be precisely through this rejection and death that redemption and consolation, freedom and comfort, would come into our world. Simeon sees the shadow of the Cross, and that's what tells him that God's great salvation had finally arrived. That is what is foreshadowed here in *The Presentation of Our Lord* – the way in which the Child would win our salvation ... the way of the Cross.

For on the Cross, Jesus Christ made atonement for our sins. He offered up His own life unto death as the sacrifice that sets us free. That's redemption, isn't it? Release from bondage by means of a payment. As we learn in the Catechism: *I believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.* Now we are free. Our sins have been forgiven by the death of our Savior. Now life – new life now and eternal life forever – real life has been opened up for us. This is our

one great consolation in the midst of sorrows. This is our comfort, our encouragement, and our joy. Jesus Christ has come and set us free. We see that already here in the *Presentation*.

Simeon and Anna were looking for redemption and consolation, and they find it in the Person of the Christ Child. And where do they find Him? In the Temple – the Temple, the place of God’s presence, where God meets with man. So it is for us today. We find Christ here in this Temple, the Church, where God has promised to be present – here where God meets with man. Here we find our Lord Jesus Christ present in His Word and in His Sacrament. And in Him we find our redemption and our true consolation.

Like Simeon and Anna, then, we cannot but help to respond with praise and thanksgiving. We sing our hymns of praise to God, because our eyes, like Simeon’s, have looked upon God’s salvation and so we too are ready to depart in peace. And like Anna, who *spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem*, we also speak about this Savior to the people we meet. We share the comfort that we have found in Christ here in this Temple – we share that good news with others, for their encouragement, too. The good news today, my friends, is that redemption and consolation, freedom and comfort, have come in the Christ Child. Redemption and consolation are yours in Him!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]