

**SERMON AT YORK 28/12/96: GEOFF CHADWICK: CHRISTMAS 1: Lk 2:22-40
"LETTING YOUR INNER SIMEON DEPART IN PEACE"**

Today we hear in Luke's Gospel the story of the baby Jesus' adventures in the temple. Firstly, his parents take him there according to the Jewish law to offer thanks to God for his birth.

Secondly, we hear how the old man Simeon took Jesus in his arms and gave thanks to God;

and thirdly, we hear how the prophetess Anna also gave thanks to God upon seeing the baby.

Each of these encounters are placed in Lk's Gospel for particular reasons. The offering of thanks by Jesus' parents emphasises the Jewishness of Jesus. It also highlights the "correctness" of his parents in fulfilling what was required of them in terms of raising a child according to the Jewish law. This is an early sign of the perfectness of Jesus' life.

The prophecies of Simeon and Anna are signs of the patience of the Jewish nation in waiting for their saviour. In both instances the prophets are old. Simeon seems to be old (although it doesn't say that directly) because he is described as devout and waiting for Israel to be saved. Anna is old. We are told that she was at least 84 years old. The notion that these two elderly people had finally seen the promise, reflects something of patient waiting. Simeon had been waiting. Anna was 84, She, too had been waiting.

The end of Simeon's patient waiting gushes over in that famous song which many of you would know as the *nunc dimittis*:

*"Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
your word has been fulfilled,
for mine own eyes have seen the salvation of thy people Israel..."*

Simeon's waiting is now over and he can depart in peace. His patient waiting has served its purpose.

It seems to me that most of us have a Simeon inside of us. It seems that all of us have a part that is patiently waiting for something. There is a longing within us which keeps us not quite at peace until the longing is finally fulfilled. I think this longing changes throughout life. It seems as if we have a Simeon of childhood, a Simeon of adolescence, a Simeon of mid-life, a Simeon of retirement, and a Simeon of old age.

Let me touch a little on each of these.

The Simeon of Childhood

Children grow up longing to be adults. The importance of age is very obvious with young children - it is dangerous to tell all four year old that you thought they were three! Children spent their time becoming adults. It's not that they aren't children it's just that they progressively become more like adults. Adults even get caught up in this type of thinking. How often have you asked a child "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It is not very often that a child gets asked "Who are you now?"

So the longing of childhood is to become a grown up. Eventually it does happen and the child is able to say like Simeon, *"Lord now lettest your servant depart in peace your word has been fulfilled..."*

But then Adolescence strikes and a whole bunch of new longings spring up.

The Simeon of Adolescence,

The Simeon of adolescence asks three basic questions:

- 1) Who will my lifelong partner be?
- 2) What will my career be?

3) What do I believe now that I am no longer a child?

The longings of childhood have given way to a new set of longings. The child who had departed in peace has had their peace disrupted by swirling hormones and the responsibilities of adulthood. Adolescence and early adulthood become the times of longing search. The search for a partner, the search for a career, and the search for a belief. I'm sure you know many people in this age bracket who have been on long and even arduous searches. Perhaps we can offer a few navigational beacons here and there, but ultimately the search can only be undertaken by the individual.

Usually, when a partner is found, a job is found and a belief is found, the Simeon of adolescence is able to say *"Lord now lettest your servant depart in peace your word has been fulfilled..."*

But ... there is another Simeon lurking not far away - the Simeon of Mid life crisis!

The Simeon of Mid-life

What is this Simeon like? How does the Simeon of Mid-life make himself known? Well it is a repeat of adolescence. The questions of teenager-hood and early adulthood return with a slight variation. Hear the questions of Mid-life crisis:

- 1) Have I married the right partner?
- 2) Am I in the right career?
- 3) What should I believe now that beliefs I once had about life and people don't seem to work anymore?

These are the longings of mid-life. It is interesting to note that most marriages break down when the partners are in their 40's, most career changes occur at 40, and people in this age bracket are very curious about belief. Some of the manifestations of this

longing period are not necessarily good - men marrying young women half their age; the ugliness of the immature 40 year old who is trying to re-live their lost adolescence, the high divorce rate, and the insensitivity of work places towards those wanting a career change. Even so, the longings of mid-life are about maturity and re-evaluation. New priorities are to be found, new ways of being adult are to be nurtured. Eventually, provided you have allowed your inner Simeon to wait patiently, there comes a time when you are able to say: *"Lord now lettest your servant depart in peace your word has been fulfilled..."*

Then comes retirement.

The Simeon of Retirement

The longings of retirement can bring both joy and sadness. The Simeon of retirement longs for time to do other things. This Simeon looks forward to peace. But there are a few sadnesses as well. There is the difficulty of giving up an identity based on a career. There is the difficulty of giving up old work friends and finding new ones. There is the strangeness of being at home; and there is the issue of ageing. "Retirement might be fun but I'm not as young as I used to be!"

This Simeon longs for a new routine, a new identity and a new purpose in life.

Even so, there comes a time when the Simeon of retirement is able to say:

"Lord now lettest your servant depart in peace your word has been fulfilled..."

The Simeon of Old age.

Finally we come to the Simeon of old age. This Simeon recognises that there are more yesterdays than there are tomorrows. This Simeon lives with the uncertainty of the time of death. This Simeon may wonder about the past and

wonder what may have been. This Simeon however, if he has learnt the lessons of life well, be able to say:

"Lord now lettest your servant depart in peace your word has been for mine eyes have seen the salvation of your people Israel."

When did that salvation happen? It was every time our inner Simeon helped us though adolescence, mid-life and retirement. Our inner Simeon has always been there, waiting. Finally the Lord does indeed let his servants depart in peace.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.