

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Many here will be familiar with the Book of Common Prayer – the ‘BCP.’ Even though many churches these days use the green prayer book, the ‘BAS,’ in fact the BCP remains authoritative even if other books have replaced it in regular worship, including here.

Today’s gospel reading includes a canticle that is always said in Evening Prayer when the Book of Common Prayer is used. You might recognise it:

- 1 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: according to thy word.
- 2 For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation;
- 3 Which thou hast prepared: before the face of all people;
- 4 To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

It’s also known as the Song of Simeon. Simeon waited a long time to see and hold the baby Jesus. This child was to be the ‘consolation of Israel’ – the salvation of the people. God has fulfilled his promise, and Simeon has seen the Saviour. God in Jesus is to be the salvation for all peoples.

Trouble in the Bible

But Simeon also recognises that there will be trouble ahead for this saviour. After blessing the child Jesus, he says to Mary his mother,

“³⁴ “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.””

Simeon foresees that Jesus will also create division – some Jews will oppose Jesus, families may be torn apart, and Jerusalem itself and the temple will be destroyed. There will also be times during the ministry of Jesus, that it will seem that he does not care about his own family. And ultimately Mary’s heart will be broken at the cross when the sword that pierces Jesus’ side will be just as painful as the sword that pierces Mary’s heart.

Jesus himself said later that he will create division.

In Luke 12:51 he says, “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.”

In Matthew 10:34 Jesus says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword.”

Trouble in the world

For us also, it is sometimes difficult to follow Jesus, and it creates division. In some countries, being a Christian is dangerous and can lead to death. Over the centuries, persecution of Christians has been frequent. But even in our seemingly peaceful country, being a Christian can be challenging. It’s disappointing to see our children or grandchildren dismiss our religion as not relevant to their lives, even if they attended church as young children. Baptism and marriage in church these days are often treated as social events, rather than commitments to live a Christian life within a Christian community. I recall a few years ago a couple wanting to have their wedding in the church because it was pretty – with no plans to continue being part of the church community in the future. How long will we have to wait until all people see the salvation that Jesus brings? Will there always be conflict and divisions between those who believe and those who do not? Will we have to wait until old age, like Simeon, until God’s salvation in Jesus is revealed to all?

Grace in the Bible

God’s salvation in the Messiah had been anticipated for some time.

When we look back, we see that many have anticipated the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus had already been recognised by:

- Elizabeth, Mary’s kinswoman, whose baby, John, “leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She called out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (1:41-42).
- Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, who prophesied that God “has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (1:69).
- Angels and shepherds (2:8-20). And the visit of the Wise Men will come a couple of years later.

At this point in the Bible, Jesus is just 40 days old. We know this because Luke says it was the time for Mary’s purification after childbirth under the Law of Moses (Leviticus 12:2–8). Luke conflates this event with Jesus’ presentation in the temple in Jerusalem, the consecration and redemption of the firstborn also required by the Law, (Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16) signifying that the child is “holy to the Lord” (v. 23).

And now, God’s action of grace, in our gospel reading, is recognised by Simeon, who knows that although he has waited for decades to see the fulfilment of a prophesy, he has at last seen the baby Jesus. The consolation of Israel has finally arrived. In the same way, the prophetess Anna has also waited for decades – widowed after seven years of marriage, she then lived in the temple, worshipping, fasting and praying for another seven decades. She is a very old woman for those times. But now, having seen the redemption of Jerusalem in the child Jesus, she begins to praise God and to speak about the child to others – to spread the good news.

Grace in the world

How then are we to share the good news? To share the message that God in Jesus is the salvation for all peoples. We are busy and impatient people. We want others to flock into our churches, because we know what a difference God in Jesus makes to our own lives. We expect instant gratification, and hate to be kept waiting. We know that “Anything worth having is worth working for.” We also need to learn that “Anything worth having is worth waiting for.” Maybe we also need to ‘Play the long game’ - the strategy that involves planning and acting in the present to achieve long-term success. This involves focusing on the future, rather than the short term, and making sacrifices today in order to see a new and different tomorrow. It’s easy to look back through the Bible and also over the last 2,000 years and see the great cloud of witnesses to the faith. Let’s also imagine this great cloud of witnesses in the future. Maybe a different sort of worship?

Our timescale is short – our own lifetimes, but God works in a time zone where a day is as a thousand years. We need to know that God is at work, even when it seems to us that God is not even present. God promised that Jesus is the salvation for all peoples. We may not believe this ourselves at times, when we see congregations shrinking and churches closing.

But how we live our lives can be ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’ as Simeon said. We need to keep the faith. We need to pray, not just for the gift of faith, but also for patience to wait for God’s unveiling of the Kingdom. God’s grace is endless. AMEN