

**❖ SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVD CANON MICHAEL KENNEDY ON 31 JANUARY 2010.**

Luke 2:29 “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word”.

The service of Choral Evensong, which we are taking part in this afternoon is one of the great glories of Anglican Christianity. Derived as it is from a conflation of the ancient offices of Vespers and Compline and blending wonderful words with great music it has enabled generations of worshippers to offer their evening devotion to Almighty God for four and a half centuries. Speaking personally, I look forward to it every Sunday afternoon, having during the morning had services in my own two little country churches, usually Morning Prayer, sometimes called Matins in one church and the Holy Communion, or Eucharist, in the other. After lunch I travel in to Armagh Cathedral in time for the choir practice and then take part in Choral Evensong as I have been doing Sunday by Sunday for thirty-five years. And then, of course, there is the twice yearly treat of being in residence here in Saint Patrick’s and attending Evensong daily, superbly sung as it always is, a particular highlight being the Gospel canticles *Magnificat*, Mary’s song, and *Nunc Dimittis*, the song of Simeon.

If I draw attention to *Nunc Dimittis* this afternoon – and my text comes from the first words of it, it is because this is the nearest Sunday to the Presentation of Christ, designated as a Principal Holy Day of the Church in the Prayer Book and capable of being observed on this Sunday. Its importance is underlined by the direction that along with certain other very special occasions, “it is fitting that the Holy Communion be celebrated in every cathedral and in each parish church or in a church within a parochial union or group of parishes”.

The Biblical event to which the observance refers is that to be found in the second chapter of St Luke’s Gospel in which,

according to the Law of Moses the child Jesus was brought up to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord – hence the title *The Presentation of Christ*. A traditional sub-title, no longer to be found in the Prayer Book, was *The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin*. In the ceremonial law of the Old Testament a woman was required to undergo a ceremony of purification after childbirth but this is not binding upon Christians and so even the sub-title which says “commonly called” has been discontinued.

What made the original Presentation of Christ memorable was the encounter between the infant Christ and two very elderly and very devout people, Simeon and Anna. Simeon is represented as one who was “looking for the consolation of Israel”, for the advent of the redemption promised by God to his people which had been long expected, and, according to Luke had received by revelation the assurance that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour and King. Inspired by the Spirit he came into the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said in words which when set to music have been used by the church in its prayers and praises for the greater part of its history, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word”. The language used is that of the manumission of a slave. The peace is peace with God for at this final stage in his life Simeon feels that he has achieved the fulfilment of all that he has looked for and prayed for – in a sense he has seen it with his own eyes – as represented in the person of the child Jesus. “For mine eyes have seen thy salvation... the salvation long prepared”. This was to be a piece of good news of universal significance intended as it was not only for the Lord’s own chosen people, Israel, but for the Gentiles, the non-Jews as well, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to his people Israel. Anna was a prophetess, not so much a “foreteller” as a “forthteller” of the word of God. She was just as devout as Simeon, having spent the greater part of her life from the

early death of her husband constantly in the House of God, the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. We don't have an inspired utterance ascribed to her as with *Nunc Dimittis* and Simeon, but Luke records that she gave thanks to God and spoke of the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The word "canticle" comes from the Latin "canticulum" meaning a "little song" and is used particularly for passages of scripture which have been set to music and used for the purpose of giving praise to God. The 2004 edition of the Prayer Book has twenty-eight of them although some are duplicates in modern English. Some non-scriptural passages have traditionally been included, for example the Gloria in Excelsis inspired as it obviously is by the angels' song at Bethlehem, and that great fourth century hymn *Te Deum*. But a special place among these and the many others that have been used and are used by the Christian church is held by those which are called the "Gospel" canticles because they come from within the Gospels themselves, specifically being found in St Luke's Gospel. *Benedictus*, the song of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist is traditionally the climax of the evening office. In Anglican Evensong there is that wonderful balance between *Magnificat* after the Old Testament reading and *Nunc Dimittis* after the New. Truly, when we come to that part of Evensong, having heard the God's written word read to us and taken it to heart it is appropriate for us to identify with what was first said by the aged Simeon when he beheld the child Jesus, "Lord, now lettest thou....now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace"...why? "For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" we have with the eye of faith beheld that salvation as it is and was expressed in the person of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

And lest we should assume naively that believing in Jesus means that we will necessarily have a trouble-free existence we need to remember also the prophetic word spoken by Simeon after he said

the words of what we call *Nunc Dimittis*. In a veiled reference to the opposition Jesus himself as an adult would encounter and the piercing sorrow that would be experienced by Mary at the foot of the cross he said specifically to Mary, “Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also). The faith we profess is one which brings a sense of fulfilment and peace, particularly in our times of prayer and praise when we come together as we have done this afternoon to worship almighty God. It is also a faith which is robust enough to cope with life’s difficulties, with frustration and opposition, and with sorrow and loss. It is capable of enabling us to face death itself as it did for Simeon when, having seen the Lord’s Christ for himself he was content to let go in some of the most beautiful words ever written and that have ever been sung.