



Bishop's Reflection

Peace for Two Old Men

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“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation, which
you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

Luke 2:29-32

Advent and Christmas are seasons of singing as great Advent hymns and Christmas carols revisit us this time of year. Perhaps St. Luke was a music lover, as in his Gospel account he chooses to tell us of Christ's birth through the medium of song. Surrounding the announcement of the birth of the Christ Child in his Nativity narrative, Luke shares with us songs which have become some of the most important songs of the Christian faith. These songs originate during very difficult times in the lives of their authors, and they sing about the overwhelmingly beautiful nature of God.

historic Churches of the Middle East, it is said at the Vespers evening service. And in the Roman and other Western liturgies, it is said at Evensong or Compline; hence it is found in the Book of Common Prayer. The song is called the *Nunc Dimittis*, due to the first words in the *Vulgate* Latin translation: *Nunc dimittis servum tuum, domine*; translated “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.”



Detail of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's *Simeon's Song of Praise*, 1631, Oil on oak panel

One of these songs is known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, or the Song of Simeon. It is that ancient canticle sung by an old priest named Simeon in the Temple, with an elderly woman named Anna standing next to him, when the baby Jesus, eight days old, was put into his arms. Christianity has gripped the four short verses of this song to her heart throughout the centuries, using them liturgically since very early times. During the time of St. Augustine of Hippo (now Algeria), in the 4th century, this song was sung in the church's evening prayers. Today in the Eastern Church rites, such as the

It is in the Temple, where we are gifted with Simeon's song. At that time the Temple was approaching completion, standing as a gleaming white jewel wedged into the northeastern corner of the city of Jerusalem. It was in this sprawling enclave rimmed in a labyrinth of colonnaded porticos and gates, that Mary and Joseph arrived with their baby, and an old man named Simeon came up to them. After taking the baby in his arms, he sings a song echoing Middle Eastern poetry. Artists throughout history have never tired of trying to catch the sacred fire in Simeon's eyes as he sings this song. Perhaps the most striking effort is by the 17th century Dutch artist Rembrandt who painted or drew this scene four times during his lifetime.

It is a marvelous scene, with all the depth and mystery one could ever hope for. One can almost feel the chemistry

of the moment as this old gentle saintly bent-over man takes this baby boy into his arms and blesses him. And in so doing, not only is the baby boy blessed but so is the old saint. Simeon clearly experiences something wonderful. It is a moment of grace in that great Temple, when the child Messiah is laid right into his arms and into his heart. In response, he sings a song that has never stopped being sung throughout Christendom.

The *Nunc Dimittis* is ultimately a song about realizing personal inner tranquility, peace and restfulness, for a profound calm is brought to Simeon's life. This is why it has been traditionally used during Evening Prayer services, as the day closes for the night's rest. After this occasion, or rather due to it, an internal peacefulness settled over Simeon as never before, thereby becoming for us a marvelous lesson in experiencing the deepest peace.

Simeon's song is his way of describing that he was finally "dismissed" (released) to truly live, after all those years of waiting to see the Messiah. In the original Greek text, Simeon's use of the word "released" has the connotation of freeing a slave.

I love the second painting Rembrandt did of this scene in 1631. The artist places the emphasis on Simeon with his typical chiaroscuro, the light shining right on his face and eyes. And Simeon, rather than looking at the child he is holding, is gazing up at God, with the baby's head slightly turned, his eyes watching Simeon's upward gaze. It is as if they are seeing beyond to something else. In this painting by Rembrandt it almost seems that Simeon and the Christ Child are looking up because they have heard a voice. If this is true, perhaps the more accurate question is, what did Simeon hear that so changed him? Interestingly, Simeon's name means "one who hears." Whether by seeing or hearing, the best word to describe Simeon's experience here is almost certainly "revelation."

Simeon clearly saw more than a child, a little baby. As his song indicates, it appears that what he saw, and what was revealed to him, was a fresh and even wholly other perspective on God. Looking at the Christ Child he says to the little one, your salvation is "a light for revelation for the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." As devout in Jewish religious law as Simeon was, it is amazing he is so open to God's aid coming to the Gentiles, non-Jews. After all, Simeon's one focus was on the coming of the "Jewish" Savior. Obviously, he had been given a new and fuller perspective on God's beautiful all-embracing nature.



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Simeon's Song of Praise*, 1631, Oil on oak panel

The spirit in which Simeon sings demonstrates for us that this new revelation of God's character brought him an inner calm. Simeon's experience echoes what another restless man experienced about four hundred years later named

St. Augustine, a North African Berber, who wrote poetically in his autobiographical *Confessions*, "Thou has touched me and I have been translated into thy peace." Simeon, with a new perspective and revelation on God, was touched and departed in peace: released to a new kind of life.

As Simeon sings, he also muses about a fresh perspective on suffering by mentioning to Mary, "that a sword will pierce [her] soul." This is the first reference in Luke's gospel to Christ's suffering. Pointing to the cost and pain Mary will feel because her son is the Messiah, and what this salvation would entail, Simeon acknowledges that life is not only sweetness and light. The word "sword" in Simeon's statement to Mary denotes in Greek a large sword. It is a large sword that will pierce Mary's soul, one that pierces to the heart. Simeon's release to a new kind of life of peace entailed a revelation of suffering.



A detailed view of Mary's (in blue head covering) expression in Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's *Simeon and Anna in the Temple*, 1627, Oil on oak panel

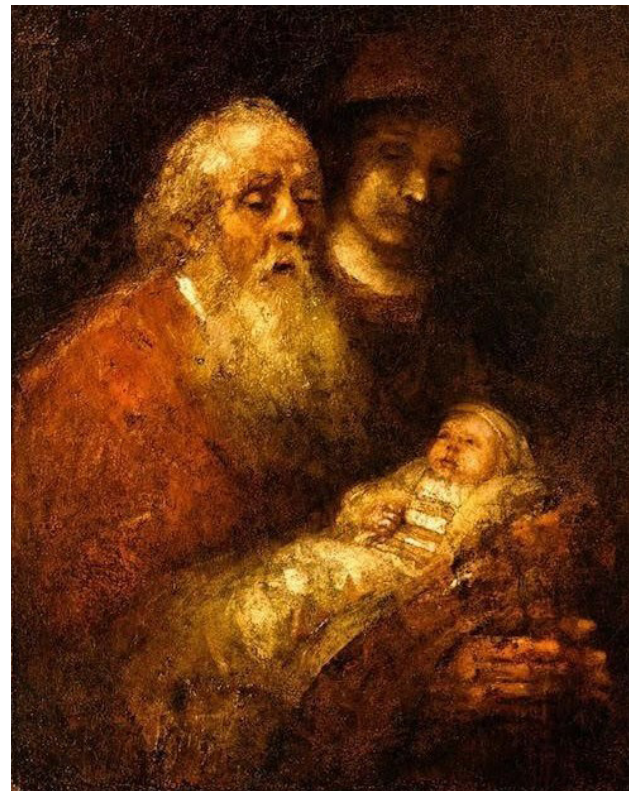
In Rembrandt's first painting of this scene, painted in 1627 when he was only twenty-two years old, Rembrandt places the emphasis on Mary, and we can almost see the future sorrow in her face. While Simeon stares intensely into her face, Mary's hands are clasped tightly in front of her while she looks at her child, as if bracing herself for what is to come. Life is both difficult and marvelous.

He is saying that the greatest circumstance of suffering in this world will bring about the greatest miracle of peace that has ever taken place and keeps on taking place in our lives and in lives all over the world. Suffering takes us to the depths, to living in the depths, to living out of the depths. And it is often in those depths that somehow the pearls are found. When the worst finally happens, or almost happens, the paradox is that a kind of peace may follow.

Some of the most tragic stories in the world today are from the Middle East, among those who have lost everything due to war and various conflicts. I recall meeting with an old Iraqi Christian man whose family had lived for centuries in Baghdad, Iraq, as members of the historic Chaldean Catholic Church. Having to flee due to intense sectarian conflict, they fled from their beautiful home, and all their family and friends, first to Jordan and then to Egypt. Having literally lost everything, as he shared with me, he picked up a little chipped glass bead that he saw in the street, and holding it he declared that his suffering had shown him the "pearl in the depths," referring to his personal experience of the faithfulness of God.

Simeon's beautiful song is all about how this child in his arms gives us the ability to live a new kind of life, where both life and suffering are immeasurably deepened; a life lived in peace, in the innermost part of our being.

Following the artist Rembrandt's death, there was found in his studio an unfinished painting of Simeon in the Temple, a work that exudes a mystical sense of hope. Many scholars feel this was his last painting. This scene had preoccupied Rembrandt since his earliest days; he had previously painted it three times in an attempt to capture the emotional power of this story of an elderly man holding the Christ Child after years of longing and waiting. By the end of his own life, Rembrandt had personally gone through significant suffering: the deaths of three of his children, his mother, his wife, personal bankruptcy, and an increasing lack of public appreciation for his style of painting. The last few years of his life were especially difficult. The difference in this fourth and unfinished painting is that for Simeon's face, Rembrandt now painted his own. Perhaps Rembrandt also saw what Simeon saw and finally understood what it meant to be released to live and enjoy God's deepest peace.



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Simeon in the Temple*, 1669, Oil on canvas