

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 27 December 2020 11.00am
Rev Peter Cornick

Seeing Salvation: 'A Song For Simeon'

A sermon preached on the first Sunday of Christmas, reflecting on seeing salvation in the child, and hope in the face of death.

T.S. Eliot's poem illuminates Simeon's words in Luke 2: 27-38

I remember as a cub scout, many years ago, planting hyacinth bulbs in a bowl on a Wednesday evening just before Christmas. The following Wednesday, we would take the hyacinth bowls to a residential care home nearby, and present them to the residents. It was my first encounter with really elderly people who seemed to be doing nothing – sitting – looking; it was quite perplexing to me as to why they would want these bowls of earth for Christmas.

T.S. Eliot's *A Song For Simeon*, begins,

Lord, the Roman hyacinths are blooming in bowls and
The winter sun creeps by the snow hills.

I don't think Eliot had been visiting residential care homes. Rather, the Romans represented the pagans. Hyacinths are named after Hyacinthus, who was in Greek myth beautiful and killed accidentally by Apollo who loved him. There is then, a note of death; the death of beauty; waste.

Looking back, giving these hyacinths to the people in the care home seems wholly ironic!

Eliot's poem is not a re-write of Simeon's word – the *Nunc Dimittis*. Rather, it is a reflection on death. A view of mortality. A commentary on Simeon. An attempt to see salvation in the context of life lived – but about to end – the turning of an epoch. Eliot describes what many of us have witnessed visiting elderly people. Eliot describes the gradual passing away of human life. He writes:

My life is light, waiting for the death wind,
Like a feather on the back of my hand.

Simeon, 'righteous and devout', has been praying in the Temple for years. Waiting. Waiting for the 'consolation of Israel.' If the prophets had hoped for a Messiah to restore the fortunes of Israel after years of being ravaged by Assyria and Babylon, transportation and the sacking of their most holy site, Simeon had been praying for

this salvation. How would God intervene? What mighty act? Pray God there will be a sign. Simeon then, is devout; righteous. He is looking to see salvation – the decay and death of his life, is about to be transformed; about to make sense; this moment of death is to become the culmination of his life.

T.S. Eliot, who has described for us, the gradual decay and wasting away of death – accompanied by Hyacinths delivered by cub scouts – now fills in something of the ‘righteous’ life of Simeon in his poetic imagination.

In the poem, Simeon, has ‘provided for the poor’; ‘given and taken honour’; no-one has left his door rejected.

There is in the poem, an attempt to see salvation as concern or compassion for the most marginalised. The kingdom of the child brought to Simeon, is to welcome sinners, those who others will despise. Mary has brought Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

“Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”, ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” (Luke 2: 23-24)

Exodus 13 refers to the consecration of the first born male. But the type of offering might lead us to Leviticus 12, referring to the purification of the woman following child birth. It is not entirely clear which ritual Jesus and Mary undergo here. But the giving of the doves or pigeons indicates Mary is not in a position to give a lamb. Poverty.

When we speak of seeing salvation, Jesus leads us to see salvation where there is poverty. In Eliot’s poem:

‘There went never any rejected from my door.’

Luke’s account of the presentation at the Temple, is entirely hopeful. Simeon, the Holy Spirit had decreed, would not die before seeing salvation. The Holy Spirit, moves Simeon to go to the Temple on this occasion to encounter Jesus. This Israelite man, announces that the child will be a light for the gentiles and the glory of Israel. There is an inclusivity about seeing salvation. The stage is set for the promise of God to encompass all, rather than the specific. This salvation is generous and embracing.

But Simeon will not see it. His consolation is that the future is set – secure and hopeful. In this child. ‘My eyes have seen your salvation ... you may now dismiss your servant in peace.’ Not only is Simeon’s life set in context, all he has worked for, the future beyond his death is set in context too.

T.S. Eliot suggests this yearning for a secure future and greater hope for one's children, common amongst all societies.

Who shall remember my house, where shall live my children's children.

But there is a fear too in Eliot. And so, in describing death, he fears his children being involved in another war; where will they live in a time of sorrow? If you are familiar with Eliot's earlier *The Wasteland*, you will hear in these lines, the desolation of the great war. But this poem, *A Song for Simeon*, is written a little later, shortly after Eliot rediscovers faith and has been baptised. Simeon, holding the child Jesus, prays to be dismissed in peace and is confident; he has seen salvation. Eliot's echo is somewhat less certain; fearful – more a prayer of supplication: 'Grant us thy peace.'

There is an expectation in the poem, that suffering is to come. Jesus' passion is noted. The same prayer of supplication is used again.

Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation
Grant us thy peace.

Simeon of course, recognises that the path ahead for the child, is not smooth.

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2: 34-35)

To see salvation, is to recognise that truth and seeking justice for Jesus, will necessitate division; some will follow – others won't. The sword will pierce our heart too on Good Friday. For Eliot, this is the mountain of desolation; the maternal sorrow; the scourges; the lamentations.

Grant us thy peace.

T.S. Eliot ends where Simeon ends, in a position to die. But having had the opportunity to contemplate mortality. To see salvation.

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
Let thy servant depart,
Having seen thy salvation.

The poem, the passage in Luke, offer us a moment in a season of birth and incarnation, to wonder what this child will bring – who he will be. And our life and death with him.

Salvation, it turns out, will be this child's legacy. Whoever Simeon was praying for as Messiah, however he thought God would intervene to save Israel, the Holy Spirit sent Simeon to the Temple that day to behold a child. To behold poverty. To behold suffering. To see salvation. At Christmas, we see salvation, by beholding a child.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation. (Luke 2: 30)

And so, let me read to you:

A Song for Simeon by T. S. Eliot

Lord, the Roman hyacinths are blooming in bowls and
The winter sun creeps by the snow hills;
The stubborn season had made stand.
My life is light, waiting for the death wind,
Like a feather on the back of my hand.
Dust in sunlight and memory in corners
Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land.

Grant us thy peace.

I have walked many years in this city,
Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,
Have given and taken honour and ease.
There went never any rejected from my door.
Who shall remember my house, where shall live my children's children
When the time of sorrow is come?
They will take to the goat's path, and the fox's home,
Fleeing from the foreign faces and the foreign swords.

Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation
Grant us thy peace.

Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
Now at this birth season of decease,
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

According to thy word.

They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation
With glory and derision,
Light upon light, mounting the saints' stair.
Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision.

Grant me thy peace.

(And a sword shall pierce thy heart,

Thine also).

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,

I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.

Let thy servant depart,

Having seen thy salvation.