

LUKE 2:25-35

I love the story of Simeon; it's just a great little story as part of the bigger story of Jesus' birth. I think I love it because of the kind of person Simeon was. He was an old man – well, we think he is, but there is nothing about the story to tell us that, only that having seen Jesus he is now ready to die; it doesn't get any better than this! So, we'll assume that he is an old man who goes to the Temple every day to pray. He's not a leader; he doesn't hold any religious office or job; he's not a priest or a minister or a teacher or anything like that; he is simply someone who goes to the temple to pray.

When he's in the temple one day, he sees a young couple come in to the temple with their eight-day old child; there is nothing unusual in that; Simeon must have seen that happen often in his long life. But something made him look twice at this young couple; there was something different about this family. We don't know what it was, but something made Simeon go and have a closer look at this family. God had promised Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died, that he would have that privilege, and here, now, in the temple, this eight-day old boy is the One whom God had promised and the Spirit at work in Simeon helps him understand that. He is delighted to see God's Messiah, the long-promised, now lying in Simeon's arms. So he sings the song that we call the *Nunc Dimittis*: "now dismiss..." (2:29f)

There are three things that I love about Simeon:

1) he's an old man who believes – he's come to end of his life still believing. When we're young faith is great, exciting, a new thing, with all sorts of new discoveries about Jesus, God, ourselves, what to believe, what we can do. But then life is full of all kinds of pressures, hardships, and distractions, so that many people drift away from Jesus and from faith. But here is an old man whose come through all of that and is ending his life in faith. There is something brilliant about people who live by faith all their life; he is an example to us all.

2) he's not afraid to embrace new ideas – he saw that Jesus was a Saviour not just for Israel, but for all the world; the Messiah was glory for Israel, but He was also light for the rest of the world; at a time when lots of people thought that only Israel should be blessed, Zealots who thought that only Israel was important, Simeon saw that God's Messiah was for everybody; 50 years later, Peter told a man called Cornelius about Jesus and Cornelius became a Christian, the first Christian who was not a Jew. Simeon, the old man, had seen that and believed it years before it came true, even though it was all new.

3) people like him saved faith in the world – Simeon prayed; Simeon kept believing; Simeon and people like him kept faith alive in Israel; it was thanks to people like him that there were people of faith to meet, greet and follow Jesus.

THE LORD'S STRANGE AND SPLENDID WAYS

The three-year old who tells her pal that Church is exciting and that she should come; the conversation in the corridor about family that leads to someone asking for a Bible to read; the eight-year old boy who watches the DVD Bible story at Rock Solid and three weeks later tells the whole story off by heart; the eighty-year old who befriends the person new to Church and makes them feel at home; the five-year old boy asking questions about Jesus. These are just five examples from the last month in this congregation of the strange and splendid ways in which Lord is at work. God is at work in us and amongst us; He is at work to build us up in our faith and bless us; He is at work to bring new people to know His blessing and love. The ways in which

He goes to work are not our ways, they are not ways we would think up, but the Lord's ways are sometimes strange, sometimes surprising, and always splendid.

We read Psalm 148 earlier and it paints this wonderful picture of God at the centre of everything. We have this great and glorious God who is to be praised by everything from the heavens and heights and angels, to mountains and hills, to small creatures, young men and maidens, old men and children. At the centre of all of that praise is the Lord, who made everything and is worthy of praise. "*let them ...*" (v13) This is our God, splendid, exalted, glorious, huge, at the centre of all creation; the whole universe revolves round this God. He is full of power, majesty, glory, and splendour, a great King who is able to command legions of angels to do His bidding. Surely this God works in ways that reflect His glory and majesty and power.

Or does He? A baby born in a stable in an obscure, occupied town in Southern Israel, born to a young woman, married to the village carpenter from an even more obscure village in the North. They were visited by shepherds from the hillside and they were the first to worship Him. They were met in the temple by old man and perhaps an even older woman called Anna. Is this how the mighty, majestic God is going to save people close to His heart? Even more, when this child grows up, He meets some fishermen and a tax collector and they become the nucleus of His disciple-group as He goes round teaching and healing. This comes always against the background of tension and trouble because powerful people don't like this Jesus of Nazareth; they think Him a trouble-maker who needs to be got rid of and so they trap Him, arrest Him, accuse Him of false charges and have the Romans crucify Him outside Jerusalem. Is this how the mighty, majestic God is going to save people close to his heart?

Well, the answer is 'yes'. Strange as it may seem, this is God's way to save the world. It is not through powerful, majestic demonstrations of power and glory; it is not through a celebrity who was famous; it is not through a king, but through Jesus, with no trappings of power and majesty, but as a humble, faithful servant, who came to do the Father's will. I wonder what the planning meeting was like, when God said to the angels 'I want you to go to Nazareth; then to Bethlehem, to shepherds'; did they shake their heads behind His back and say 'God's lost plot!' But, of course, the great and glorious God had it all worked out; the world is saved by Jesus in ways we would never have dreamed up, but God saw what was needed and did it. These are the strange and splendid ways of the Lord to save the world for ever.

I can put names to all five of these examples that I gave you at the start; I'm not going to, to save their blushes and there are lots more. "The real saviours of Israel were humble, obscure, devout people, who could not have argued with a scribe or a Sadducee for 5 minutes and certainly would not have tried; who could have been made to look foolish by any clever rabbi, and could not have held a candle to any fiery, loud-voiced, sabre-rattling Zealot; and yet when it came to the really deep things of life – things like prayer, and the purity of heart that sees God – were a thousand miles beyond all these others. It was Simeon and his like who were the leaven of the land. It was obscure, godly homes like his that were the backbone of Isr." (James S. Stewart *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* p.22)

Nothing has changed! The backbone of our nation, the backbone of Church, those who will keep the faith alive in Scotland for a new generation are the humble, devout people. Some will be famous, some are obscure, all will be people who live by faith, people who read their Bible and pray, people who humbly and quietly bear witness to their Saviour, people, who draw no attention to themselves, but by their words and lifestyle and humility, point people to Jesus. Not many of us could debate theology

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with scholars; not many of us could stand on the street corner and preach to a crowd, but showing love, praying, embracing new ideas, believing, humbly trying to be like Jesus – that's what we're called to do; these are the strange and splendid ways of Lord; this is His strategy to bless and save the people close to His heart.