

Nunc Dimittis

30 1 11

Almighty and ever-living God,
clothed in majesty,
whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple
in substance of our flesh
grant that we may be presented to you
with pure and clean hearts,
by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

My text may be found in Luke 2 v26: 'It has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.'

It was 1979. A Sunday evening. I was sitting in the living room of our house in Barkingside. The programme on TV had just finished. The closing credits began to roll and I heard for the first time this music (*play Geoffrey Burgon's setting of the 'Nunc Dimittis' sung by Paul Phoenix*).

The Nunc Dimittis is part of the service of Evensong. It records the words of Simeon encountering the infant Christ brought by his parents Mary and Joseph to the Temple in Jerusalem 40 days after his birth. According to our text, the Holy Spirit has promised Simeon that he would not die before he had seen with his own eyes the Messiah. Now at this very moment that privilege has been realised, the prophecy fulfilled and, fulfilled, Simeon prophesies.

Today is the last of five sermons on Epiphany – God made manifest. We have seen how first God manifested himself in the rising of a new star in the east observed by the Wise Men who journeyed to Jerusalem to find the infant Messiah. We heard that at his Baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was approved by the voice of God from heaven and we saw the Holy Spirit alighting on him in the form of a dove. We saw, when Andrew brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus, how God is made manifest by sharing that knowledge with another folk. We saw how Jesus' ministry fulfilled the prophecies in the Old Testament by revealing God to the people in his teaching and by his miracles of healing. And now, today, we see the manifestation of God to Simeon when Simeon, cradling the infant Jesus in his arms, is ready to die fulfilled now that God has fulfilled his word.

Simeon is an old man. According to Torah, he has lived a righteous life. His desire is to see the Kingdom of Israel restored by the advent of God's Messiah. Full of the Holy Spirit, Simeon has been promised that he would see the Messiah with his own eyes before he dies. Prompted by the Spirit, Simeon comes to the Temple at the very moment Mary and Joseph are there to make the prescribed thanksgiving sacrifice for the birth of their first-born boy.

Taking the baby in his arms, Simeon is inspired to utter the words we know as the Nunc Dimittis. I quote the version from the King James Bible: 'Lord, now lettest

thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared in the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy chosen people, Israel'.

His prophetic words are beautifully sad. He recognises that he has seen in the child the man promised by God to restore Israel. But Simeon's vision is enlarged to embrace Jew and Gentile alike. This Messiah will not only restore Israel's glory but will prove also to be the light which will enlighten the Gentiles. It is a vision of the universal faith embodied in Christ's universal church. And with those words, Simeon is prepared to die knowing that God has kept his promise to him. The gift of dying, fulfilled, at the right time, must be a prize we would all value.

And so at Candlemas, we have a fifth way in which God manifest's himself – through the Nunc Dimittis, this prophecy of Simeon. There is a sense of everything is on track, that God's will will 'be done on earth as it is in heaven'. There is a shared sense in each of our five examples of epiphany that it is in and through Jesus that God is manifesting himself. That is surely the purpose of the Incarnation which will be fulfilled in the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Second Coming.

And it is to the end of Jesus' life that we will turn in Lent when we journey through towards Holy Week and Easter, to the Passion and to the Resurrection of the Lord

Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's Dinard
30th January, 2011*

H: Sermon 23: Nunc

