

3. Nunc Dimittis: Born that man may die in Peace

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome everyone to our lunchtime carols. We're going to start by singing Hark, the Herald Angels Sing. Let's stand together and sing our first carol. Let's stand together and sing our first carol.

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[2 : 22] Let's stand together and sing our first carol. Let's stand together and sing our first carol.

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Let's stand together and sing our first carol. Well, let me welcome you to our lunchtime carols, whether you're a regular at our lunchtime Bible talks or whether this is your first visit.

It's lovely to have you with us. This week we're spending slightly longer together as we celebrate Christmas. But if you do need to slip away back to the office, then feel free to leave whenever you must.

Otherwise, please do stay till the end and enjoy a mince pie over your coffee as we spend some more time together at the end of the service. Over Advent, we've been looking together at Luke's songs for the coming Savior.

[3 : 48] And after Zechariah's song, which we listened to last week, Luke passes rather quickly over Jesus' birth and the angel's song and onto his finale, the song of old Simeon known as the Nunc Dimittis.

And that's what we're going to be studying today. So let's read that together now. You'll find it on the sheets on your chairs, on the backs of these service sheets. Luke chapter 2, verses 21 to 40.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

And when the time came for their purification, that means Mary's purification along with Joseph, her husband, according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as it is written in the law of the Lord.

Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

[5 : 01] Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. And this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel. And the Holy Spirit was upon him.

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit 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, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word.

For my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people, Israel.

And his father and mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

[6 : 15] And a sword will pierce through your own soul also so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher.

She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin and then as a widow until she was 84. And she did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Israel.

And when they performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee to their own town of Nazareth and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him.

While Luke has been writing about the son, long expected and born at last to give his people victory over the grave.

[7 : 25] So before we look at that passage together, let's stand and sing our second carol, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. O Come, Emmanuel.

O Come, Emmanuel. O Come, Emmanuel. Our God and Mary. Our God and Mary. We are praying for His child and life.

If He has been writing, We are praying for His own³⁷, He Instructoram them.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[9 : 27] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Heavenly Father, what a joy it is to sing of the Son you sent to ransom and redeem your captive people, to close the path to misery forever.

And we thank you, Lord, that in his first coming, death's dark shadows were indeed put to flight. And we pray that as we listen now to your word, you would help us to wait patiently for his coming again.

Help us, Father, through what you have to teach us now to find eternal joy and peace in the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

[11 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

final song for the saviour, it's left to a pair of oldies to explain what Jesus coming was all about. Simeon and Anna, 84 years a widow. You see, in Luke's gospel, it's the old folk who can really get excited by Christmas. My daughter's nursery goes to town at this time of year, but according to Luke, it's in the nursing homes where the really wild Christmas parties ought to be.

Because, you see, the most precious thing which Jesus brought us is something a young child will never see the value of. But I'd imagine that the longer you've lived, the more you might cherish this wonderful gift. It's the gift of peace. Peace both in this life and crucially at its end.

Yes, it's true as we sung that Christ was born, that man no more may die. And yet old Simeon in this last song sees a rich and more immediate consequence of Jesus coming. He knew, didn't he, like all the rest of us, that he'd still have to face the grave. Christians fear the same stark end as everyone else. And yet, in the birth of Christ, Simeon found peace. So here's Christmas for grown-ups.

[14 : 15] Luke's final song shows us one of the most precious things Jesus' birth can bring us in this life. He was born that man might die in peace. Or if I want to risk getting in trouble with one or two of you, perhaps we could call this song, Why Old Folks Can Be Excited by Christmas.

But before we meet Simeon and Anna, there's the baby himself. And one of the things Luke considers most exciting about Christmas is the strange destiny this little child came to achieve.

Almost immediately, his attention shifts away from the stable and onto the temple. At verse 22, at the top of your sheets there, we've leapt forward 40 days from that Christmas night.

Because it's what happens now that Luke will use to explain what Jesus' birth was all about. We've reached a time when, under Jewish law, Mary would be purified after giving birth.

And if you read either the first or the last paragraph of our passage, you can't help but notice something. Something which seems slightly odd and incidental to us, but obviously very important to Luke.

[15 : 38] He's desperate to show us how, right from his infancy, the baby Christ was obedient to God's law. Because the Christmas story, according to Luke, isn't simply about the babe in the manger, but the son presented for sacrifice.

That, I think, is the message of the beginning and the end of our passage, verses 22 to 28 and 39 to 40. The son presented for sacrifice.

Did you notice how often that little phrase, according to the law, is repeated? It's like a big set of bookends around the whole passage. And at first it seems a little jarring, doesn't it?

Some quirky historical detail intruding into the Christmas story. But as we'll see, this little child's commitment to God's law will be central to his destiny.

So Luke labors the point for us. He's circumcised on the eighth day as the law commanded. His parents come to Jerusalem to obey two of God's commands.

[16 : 49] First, to purify Mary after her childbirth, verse 24. And so they offer what the law allowed for a poor family, a pair of pigeons.

But there's a second command to obey, and that's for their son, for Jesus. Every firstborn, verse 23, rightfully belonged not to his parents, but to the Lord himself.

It was a tradition which went back thousands of years to the time God had rescued his people from terrible slavery in Egypt. And ever since then, when the first son was born, they'd sacrifice a lamb to redeem him.

It was an acknowledgement that he belonged to God's grace. This time, though, it's more than honoring a tradition, isn't it? If we'd been reading Luke, we'd know that this firstborn son belongs to God already.

He's his son. And God's claim on this little child will go far further than on most.

[18 : 00] In fact, as we'll see later in verse 35, God's claim on this son will be incredibly costly. There's a bitter sweetness to his birth.

He makes the angels sing and his mother weep. And that destiny will require him to be totally blameless under the law.

Innocent. It's a destiny which, just like this earliest account of his life, will be focused on the temple. The place of atonement and sacrifice.

Because this Christmas baby was born to be presented to God. A sacrifice on behalf of his people. He was born to be that spotless holy lamb whose death would take away their sin forever.

And that's the shocking truth about his birth, which Luke is so determined to drive home. It's his final message, isn't it? In verses 39 to 40. They did everything according to the law.

[19 : 09] And the child grew and became strong and knew God's favor. In other words, right from the very earliest days of his life, he was an acceptable sacrifice for his people's sins.

It's the one Christmas truth which we cannot sentimentalize away. One of the slightly quaint carols captures that fierceness of the Christmas story rather well.

This little babe so few days old is come to rattle Satan's fold. All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake.

A vulnerable, shivering child born to die. Born to rattle Satan's fold. There's no denying something slightly chilling in the Christmas message.

Glorious yet brutal. And for these two elderly believers who we'll meet next, it's what made Christ's birth the richest thing of all.

[20 : 23] Well, that's a good moment to break off from Luke's account and sing of the joy this child's birth and death would bring. He's come to make his blessings flow where Eden's curse is found.

Let's stand and sing joy to the world. The Lord is come. The Lord is come.

The Lord is come.

Your centuries crossed the dead end. The two Thank you.

Thank you.

[23 : 05] Thank you.

Thank you. Anna called it redemption in verse 38. She's waiting for just the same thing, isn't she?

So here are two deeply religious people, but both of them longing for something more. And we're told in verse 25 that Simeon was a righteous and devout man. He's a religious man.

Now, that doesn't mean he was a self-righteous man. It simply means that his religion was put in just the right place. It led him to long for the Lord's Christ.

Living faith is longing for God to do what he promised. And God had revealed something wonderful to old Simeon. He told him that he would not die, verse 26, until he'd met the Messiah.

[24 : 56] Well, one day in the temple courts, he sees a little baby. And of course, to you and me, all babies look the same, don't they? Mine are two years apart. And honestly, even I can't tell the difference in a photograph.

But do you notice three times Luke mentions that the Holy Spirit is leading Simeon. It's a little reminder that what Simeon is about to see and to say comes with all the authority of God.

He sees a little baby and knows without a doubt that this is him. This is the one I've been waiting for. And so in a beautifully tender moment, he takes the little child into his arms and sings the happiest song of his life.

Verse 29. Lord, I'm ready to die. I've met the one you sent as the sacrifice of peace. I'm clinging to him right now. And now that you have done what you promised, I'm ready.

You see, it's what Luke showed us at the start and the end of the passage, which brings such joy to Simeon. Simeon. He knows that this child, as he puts it in verse 30, is salvation. That's an unusual name for a baby, isn't it? Actually, it's what Jesus means, God's salvation.

[26 : 26] And then in verse 32, he expands on it. He's a light, not just for Israel, but to show all of us, the Gentiles, what God is like.

And he's glory for Israel. Yes, mild. He lays that glory by. He looks just like any other baby. But the child in Simeon's arms is the glory of God come at long last to his temple.

Born that man no more may die. Or as Simeon puts it, born that man may die in peace. How often do you hear people say, I'd love to see just one last Christmas?

There's something about this time of year which we long for, isn't there? But actually, if you're sitting by the bed of a loved one thinking those sorts of thoughts, it's this first Christmas you need to talk to them about.

It's because of this first ever Christmas that we can have peace now. In life, we can know that God is not against us.

[27 : 36] He's dealt with our sin through his son. But above all, even at life's end, if we're holding tight to Christ like old Simeon, we can know that we are ready to meet God.

And that is a peace which will never disappoint. So often, with the things we look forward to at this time of year, they seem cheap and tensely once it's all over.

Like the gifts inside a cracker. But this never, ever will. Now, I'm not pretending that Christians don't fear dying.

Sometimes you hear people talk like that, don't you? And it just doesn't seem human, doesn't seem real. We still have to face death. And the process of dying is never easy.

There's nothing wrong with being afraid of that. But what Simeon found was a real, believable peace.

[28 : 38] He was released from his long wait, knowing that death itself had lost its terror. He knew that there wasn't a drop of anger or punishment lying beyond it.

And anyone who's taken this child to their hearts is ready to die. That is the real grown-up message of Christmas.

But of course, it must also be true that if you haven't met this child, then you're not prepared for death. You can't find real peace without him.

There are certain things, aren't there, that you just don't do until you're prepared. You don't leave it until the 24th to buy your wife's Christmas presents. Or if you do, you don't make the mistake again.

You don't go in for major surgery without making a will. You're just not ready. And you don't risk dying without the Lord Jesus to make you right with your maker.

[29 : 45] To live like that is a life without peace and a death without heaven. In fact, it is a living and a dying hell. I listened to a program recently about end-of-life care.

And it discussed a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in March 2009. A study of terminal cancer patients who used prayer as a means to help them cope.

And it found that in the last week of life, these deeply religious people were more likely to resort to desperate, life-prolonging intervention.

They just weren't ready to die. You can be very religious but not at peace. You can be a regular churchgoer but never actually cling to Jesus himself.

And you can also be a complete atheist and simply give up on life, can't you? Be so weary of the struggle and the discomfort that you want it to end out of sheer indifference.

[30 : 55] And that's not real peace either. That's not what Simeon's talking about. He and Anna had clearly lived their lives to the full. And they were both utterly devout, weren't they?

Always in the temple, Luke tells us. But it wasn't that which made them ready. It wasn't their religion. It was what it led them to. It was seeing Christ for themselves.

Their religion led them to real hope. So we've seen the sun presented for sacrifice and the saints waiting in faith for the prince of peace.

And finally, right in between the voices of these two elderly believers comes the most pointed moment of the passage. Verses 33 to 35. They've got to tell us more about the destiny of this child.

You see, this little unassuming boy is the savior searching men's hearts. Mary and Joseph, verses 33, marveled at what Simeon had to say about their son.

[32 : 03] But that marvelous wonder of Christmas would come at a marvelous cost. So before Simeon's duty is done, he has to warn Mary. It'll be as if a sword pierces her own soul.

For her son to achieve the salvation he was born for, she would have to give him up. Her baby was bound for the cross right from the cradle.

And that great destiny will shape the future, not just of Mary and Simeon and Anna, but of every one of us sitting here. He's appointed, says Simeon, for the rising and falling of many in Israel.

For some, just like Simeon, he truly would meet the hopes and the fears of all the years. But for others, just as the prophets had warned, he'd be a rock over which they'd fall.

A sign, verse 34, who came to be opposed. Fine for Christmas. But someone to stick in the attic with the tinsel as soon as you get the chance.

[33 : 14] So that light, which shows all of us what God is like, also shows each one of us what we are really like on the inside. He reveals the thoughts, verse 35, of many hearts.

It's like that, isn't it, with the things that we love or hate. It shows up what we hide away deep in our hearts. Who we fall for or who we vote for, who we hire.

All of that says something about us, doesn't it? And it's just the same with what you do with this Christ child. His coming is the event which defines every last one of us.

Some of us will recognize the most precious thing of all. And like Anna in verse 38, we'll have to tell people about it in our excitement.

And of course, that will be costly. If you sit down to your Christmas lunch this year and tell your family that you've met the Lord Jesus, I expect some of us might get the odd snide comment.

[34 : 21] He's a light for all, isn't he? But a light who is opposed and shut out by many. And there's no use trying to hide the embarrassment.

Luke doesn't. I guess for Anna, she just thought that compared to the peace she'd found in Christ, it was worth being laughed at occasionally.

And so after decades of patient, faithful waiting, she uses her twilight years, her pensioner years, to point men and women to the Lord Jesus.

What an example she is to us of faithful service. Well, perhaps you haven't yet made up your minds about the Lord Jesus. Perhaps you've been coming to these services for years.

But the one thing you haven't done is thrown your hope for peace on this child, this Christ. And perhaps that's because you just feel you don't know him well enough yet.

[35 : 20] In which case, let me encourage you to have a very careful look at what is on offer. Why not make this Christmas the time you make an honest decision about Jesus?

It takes a bit of courage, doesn't it, to be straight with yourself. But what we make of Christ is the single fact that will define our lives and our eternity.

Luke's claim is that this is what Christmas is all about. That we can live our lives without fear. And however old or young we are, however much time we've spent in church, that is something terrifically exciting.

He was born that we might die in peace. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this most precious gift of all.

Help us, Father, like these patient old saints to end our lives well in the trust of your dear Son.

[36 : 34] We ask that this Christmas we would indeed find all of our hopes and fears met in him. And we ask it in his namesake.

Amen. How silently, how silently that wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

As we close, let's sing our final carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem. Let's sing our final carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[39 : 35] Amen. Amen.

And so may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always. Amen.