

Candlemas 2017

Luke 2.22-40

One of the parental duties I take very seriously is the musical education of my children. My kids are growing up in the age of Katy Perry and Taylor Swift; Bruno Mars and Justin Timberlake; and Lady Gaga who is due to take the stage before the world in a matter of hours. There are some songs with these younger artists I can appreciate, but my agenda is much broader. When Madeleine gets in my car before school and asks, 'Daddy, can we just have a little U2 this morning?' I beam with pride. My project is working.

In their playroom, we've strategically placed Motown classics and Stevie Wonder. I received a small vinyl player for my birthday, so my kids have gotten to experience the delight of Louis Armstrong's scratchy vocals on a scratchy record. Colin loves YouTube videos of the legendary jazz drummer, Buddy Rich. Madeleine prefers videos of the American fiddler, Mark O'Connor. Train up a child, friends. Train up a child.

We're also teaching them sacred songs, too—songs to punctuate the moments of the day, songs for the journey of faith. Last winter, I worked in a new bedtime song for Colin after we go through his nightly playlist. I began singing the Song of Simeon—the David Clifton version, of course, the song we'll sing to conclude this service. In no time, it became a Colin favorite. 'That's my favorite song—we sing it at church.' And so I'm feeling encouraged about my son's musical education—he's learning songs to end the day with Jesus.

But there's something different when you sing the Song of Simeon in February at the time of Candlemas. You hear the story behind the song. And here we discover that there's something a bit haunting about this ancient hymn. It's the outro, if you will, the words following this song of praise. Simeon's song ends with a bright, full major chord—this child will be a light for the Gentiles and the glory of Israel.

But then there's this little outro, almost as if that final major chord has been inverted to its minor variant. You hear it in the words Simeon addresses to Mary: *Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)*. Stop. That parenthetical phrase changes everything. If a composer were writing a score on this text, there would be a fermata there—an extended, sustained tone. *A sword will pierce through your own soul* is no passing thought. Mary and Joseph entered the

Temple for her ritual purification after the days of her pregnancy and delivery were complete. Now Mary bears this pregnant, solemn prophecy in her soul—a sword will pierce through your own soul.

Her son will be the cause for the fall and rising of many in Israel. Ok, that wasn't so much revelation as confirmation for Mary. A quick glance at Mary's own song—the Magnificat—reveals what the Virgin Mother believed at the moment she conceived the Son by the Holy Spirit. Mary magnified the Lord's faithful promise in song and sang, *'he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.'* The opening words of Simeon's extended blessing were more confirmation than epiphany.

But not so with the remaining truths of this blessing. This son will bear a sign which opposes many in Israel. Mary will bear suffering in her heart even as her Son bears the fullness of human suffering in his body and soul.

When you hear the story behind the Song of Simeon, it's difficult to see how all of this is blessing. For it means the future suffering for Mary and her son—suffering that was opaque on the 40th day after the Christ child was born. Here is the paradox of Candlemas. This child's light will bring salvation to the nations and will be the glory of Israel. This child will bear a sign of opposition and his mother's heart will be broken. // And yet the prophecy of future suffering neither drowns Simeon's present blessing and joy, nor diminishes the promise of glory. It belongs.

Somehow that same contradiction finds its home in our hearts 2,000 years after Simeon greeted and blessed the Christ child and his mother. It belongs in our lives, for we bear that sign of opposition—the sign of the cross. In this sign you were baptized. The inheritance and benefits of Christ's redemption are given to us as adopted sons and daughters of God. But not without suffering.

That's a difficult truth to embrace for yourself. But it may be equally, if not more, difficult to embrace for those you love most. In the quiet moments of singing to the Song of Simeon with my son, I'm mindful that this child I love with all my heart will experience suffering in this world. And I don't know what that will be. He will suffer because he is human; he will know suffering because he bears 'the sign of opposition' the sign of the cross.

I feel this burden as a parent, but this truth transcends parenting. It pertains to all human relationships of sincere devotion. You cannot rescue those you love from suffering. You will walk with your family and friends through the dark valleys of their

suffering. You can bear their cross like another Simon—Simon of Cyrene. You keep vigil in the dark night of suffering as Mary did for her Son at Golgotha. You prepare to even give your life for those you love. Even still, you may not be permitted to take away the pain they will know.

I'm reminded of Paul's words on this Candlemas: 'I [want] to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, [that I] may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' Our future suffering may be solemn and uncertain, but here is a greater hope—anyone who bears the sign of the cross in baptism bears the sure and certain hope of resurrection.

And so perhaps there is a repeat sign at the end of this song, an invitation to return to the beginning. After all the rejoicing, the blessing, the solemn prophecy of suffering, still we sing Simeon's song which says, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace...' Yes, peace and hope seal the promise of Candlemas.

Candlemas becomes a bridge in time— a bridge between the season of the Incarnation and the season of Lent. As such we must remember that we can only experience our own suffering, we can only practice self-denial inasmuch as we remember the promise of peace and the vision of glory. For those we love and who suffer greatly, we cannot remove their pain. But we can sing a song that God saves and saves forevermore. For the Song of Simeon is not a solo—it is a chorus—a chorus of the saints who follow the way of the Cross until suffering is no more and they arrive home in that City where there is no Temple for its Temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. Amen.