

The Incarnation Part 9 - 'The Prophecy of Simeon'

by Charles Alexander

The sermon explores the significance of the Incarnation, the prophecy of Simeon, and the sword that pierces our souls, highlighting the conflict between light and darkness and the purpose of sanctification.

Scripture: John 11:25

Topics: "Christology", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches on the profound prophecy of Simeon regarding Jesus, foretelling His impact on many in Israel and the sign of contradiction He would be. The sermon delves into the mystery of Christ's incarnation, emphasizing the unity of His divine and human nature. It reflects on the growth of Jesus in wisdom and stature, drawing parallels to the growth of His mystical body, the Church. The sermon concludes with a poignant exploration of the sword that would pierce Mary's soul, symbolizing the ongoing spiritual warfare and suffering endured by the Church for the sake of the gospel.

Transcript

Luke 2:34-35 : And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, 'Behold this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed'.

We always enjoy reading the gospel according to St. Luke, a very well-informed man, who was a physician. There always appears to be somewhat of a mystique about doctors; though, when you really get to know them, they are no different from any other men or women: with the same weaknesses, the same foibles, the same contradictions and inconsistencies. But because they deal with matters of life and death, and because they have a specialised knowledge concerning these things, people depend upon them. Therefore the doctor is held in awe by the majority of people, whether he deserves it or not.

But Luke was writing about the great physician, who never lost a case. He was not only able to overcome death, but He Himself said (John 11:25-26), "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." How glad Christians should be that we not only know about Him, but actually know Him, whom to know is life eternal. How this ought to engross our attention all the year round, and never more so than at Christmas time. We believe in the providence of God, and can disregard the havoc which the worldly mind has made

of this season of the year. We have a collective heritage, and we are all concentrating, or ought to be, on the one stupendous fact that God became incarnate as man in the womb of the virgin, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

Into the mystery of that incarnation, who can enter? The best of our theologians and divines have lost themselves in a labyrinth of mystery, endeavouring to probe and find their way through to an understanding of how God became man, and ever will remain God and man, now and for all eternity. Exactly what limitations were they which He accepted when an unconscious embryo? Was He God then? Where was His consciousness as God when He was not two persons? He was only one person as Christ Jesus our Saviour, ever one in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. There is no confusion of person between the Father and the Son, or between either and the Holy Spirit; three separate and distinct persons, and yet always in one glorious and mysterious unity of one God; each being God, yet not three Gods, but one God in three persons. Where was the Godhead then? And where was Christ's Godhead when He was curiously wrought as man?

In Luke 2:40 we read, And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. In the last verse of that chapter, we read, And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. Do we wonder how much of mystic understanding there is in that verse, and how much we are to consider Christ's mystical body as we see His natural body growing in stature, until He reaches the full dimensions and form of a man? Young people appear to grow up fast until they reach the full stature of manhood and womanhood; then they stop, and never get any further than that, because their stature and form are complete. "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature." The apostle Paul insists that we are the body of Christ, in a mystical sense, and states (Ephesians 4:13) that His spirit is poured out, Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That point has not been reached yet, otherwise we would not be here on earth, and the earth would not be here for us to be upon it, for when Christ's stature has reached its uttermost limits, His body will be complete in the Church. Then there shall be no waiting because that shall be the maturity of creation. "In a moment"(1 Corinthians 15:52), "in the twinkling of an eye we shall be changed" (changed into His likeness). The Church will be complete, and the work of God will be accomplished.

Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man in a bodily sense; as He is now, in a mystical sense, similarly increasing in His body, the Church. We see the great mystery of His birth and infancy, and the related events in the account which the beloved physician Luke has given to us. He was a good physician, a good man, who accompanied Paul and, in the providence of God, no doubt helped to keep the ailing apostle alive with his wise advice and helpful ministrations.

Luke was a disciple, but not an apostle; like Mark, he did not enter into the holy apostolate. He was the companion of the apostles, and he made it his business, as a doctor, to find out all about the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. When he set out to write his gospel, he did not copy any of the two gospels of Matthew and Mark, which probably preceded his. We know that John's was the last to be written, and that it is very different from all the other three. Luke's was very different from the preceding two, and evidently Luke did not know anything at all about the journey into Egypt, because he does not even mention it. Luke 2:39 says, And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. But Luke is bypassing two years of time, during which Joseph and Mary had taken the infant Jesus down into Egypt, to escape the wrath of Herod the king. It looks as if Luke did not know about the flight into Egypt, but it is quite likely that he did. One of the advantages of the fact of Luke's

omissions in his account is the assurance that the writers of the four gospels did not copy one from the other. If Luke was copying from Matthew, he would not have left out something as important as the massacre of the innocents of Bethlehem, and the astonishing journey down into Egypt. On returning two years later, Joseph decided he would not go to Bethlehem, where he belonged so far as his house and lineage were concerned. He ought to have been there from some points of view, but he went to Nazareth in Galilee, so as to be outside of Herod's jurisdiction, and beyond the reach of Herod's wrath.

Luke misses all that out, but he never intended his gospel to be a copy. He writes many things which neither Mark nor Matthew seem to know anything at all about, though they probably did. None of them set out to write everything that happened in the infancy of our Lord. Between them, they provide us with the essentials to faith, and we are thankful for this. We are also thankful that Luke was a physician, and that he had perfect knowledge of all these things from the beginning. He provides details of what happened before the baby was born, and also before John the Baptist was born, that only a doctor could have ascertained. Undoubtedly he acquired them through conversation with Elizabeth and with Mary. They told him because he was a doctor, and they knew they could confide in him and tell him all they knew. So he set it all down in his parchments, preserving it all for us, as only a doctor could, under the inspiration of God. He found out all about that journey to Jerusalem, when the Saviour was only forty days old; we know that, because it was "according to the Law of Moses". The first born son was counted holy to the Lord; that is He belonged to the Lord, in a very special way in Israel, and had to be treated accordingly. His parents could only have Him back as their possession by making an offering for Him. Joseph and Mary were not wealthy enough to make a great offering, and so it was sufficient for them to offer a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. According to the Levitical law, they were able to offer these in the Temple. This had to take place on the fortieth day after birth in the case of a man child; and so it was that the Lord was forty days old. The wise men had not yet appeared; they probably arrived shortly after the visit to Jerusalem by Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus.

The wise men could not yet have come, because on the very night that they came they were warned by God, and Joseph was also warned, that Herod would kill the child. Consequently, the wise men went back to the east by another route, while Joseph and Mary saddled up the ass at dead of night and set out for Egypt to escape the wrath of the king. Up to the fortieth day all was well, and the people at the palace knew nothing at all of what was going on. Only one or two of the dear people of God knew, such as Simeon. Simeon was an aged man, who waited for the consolation of Israel; that is, he looked for the Messiah, and he knew by Daniel's prophecies, and by other tokens from the Old Testament prophets, that the time was at hand. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit spoke to him; in what way we do not know. Whether it was a dream, in a vision of the night, or by a voice from heaven, we cannot tell; many wonderful things were happening at that time. But Simeon knew, having received it direct from God, that he would not die until he actually set eyes upon the Lord's Christ, the King of Israel; and so he waited in the temple. In view of the fact that the prophet Malachi (3:1) had said, "The Lord whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple," where else would he wait? So he did not pass day or night out of the temple courtyards; he made his bed there every night in one of the courts provided for the purpose. Day and night, day and night; for ought we know, month after month, or year after year; we know not how long that faithful man kept his vigil, knowing that the Lord whom he sought would suddenly come to His temple, without warning.

That day the promise was fulfilled! He saw Joseph and Mary, with their first born babe being carried in Mary's arms; and a voice from heaven spoke in his soul, telling him that it was the Lord whom he sought. He gathered the babe in his arms, and pronounced over that tiny form (Luke 2:29), Lord, now lettest thou

thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation. It showed that he knew a good deal about the prophecies too, and dwelt in them, for he refers to the child (Luke 2:32) as A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. He knew a good deal more than many of today's scholars who write books on the fulfilment of prophecy, for they do not understand why Simeon put the Gentiles first, and the Jews last. It is because the position was going to be prophetically reversed, as reversed it was, and will remain so, until the Lord comes again. He did not come for just one family on the earth; He came for all men everywhere. The gates of the heavenly Zion were to be flung wide open to sinners, from north, south, east and west; and Israel would be rejected. But through God's mercy, they also would find mercy; and through God's grace, they, if and when they believed, would also find grace, and know the meaning of this pronouncement: A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. He could see Israel falling from its privileges, but the elect in Israel rising up out of the rack and ruin of a nation devoted to destruction through the sin of its people. Simeon said to Mary (Luke 2:34), Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against, signifying that Christ would not be acceptable to those to whom He came, but would be spoken against by them, as indeed He was, and still is to this day, His very name execrated amongst them.

There follows a peculiar statement which the translators have put in parenthesis in verse 35: Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also. Here we see the wonder of Simeon's prophecy. He penetrated right to the end of those three and thirty years. He would not be there of course, now that he had seen the Lord's Christ. He besought God to let his soul depart in peace, and probably did not survive that encounter with the Lord his God more than another few weeks. He had no further purpose or interest in living; he had been ready for heaven a long time. Now the great moment has come and he pleads with God to allow him to depart in peace, for he has seen His promised salvation with his own eyes. Simeon's prophecy was fulfilled, and no doubt Mary remembered it.

The "Stabat Mater" is the musical setting for a Latin hymn on the agony of the virgin Mary at the crucifixion, and the literal meaning is "the mother was standing". Mary was standing at the cross, and He who was once the babe was now being offered up as a sacrifice for sin.

At the cross her station keeping,
Stood a mournful mother weeping
Where He hung, the dying Lord.
For her soul, of joy bereaved,
Thou with anguish deeply grieved,
Felt the sharp and piercing sword.

"(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,)" ; is it not remarkable, even mystifying, that the Christmas story should be so marred by a sentence such as this? Strangely put in brackets by translators, but properly so, enclosing it as a thought to be pondered upon, the meaning to be revealed more than thirty years later.

So it is that, when Christ came into this world, He did not bring peace; He brought a sword; He brought war, spiritual war, conflict between the power of darkness and the power of light. Mary's experience was the experience of the Church, for she stood at the cross for each one of us; she stood there for the Church. Remember the Lord, in John's gospel, looks upon her as He hangs upon the tree, and He says, "Woman behold thy son!", and to John, "Behold thy mother!" And that is the Church in its ministry, in its apostolate, for the Church is one in Old Testament and New Testament. Mary, that good woman, represented this mystery, as other women had represented that mystery too in Old Testament times, for the Old Testament Church gave birth to the New. The apostles came from their mother ("Behold thy son!", " Behold thy mother!"); and so the Church is one, in its body and its head, in its apostolate and its teaching. The sword which was to pierce Mary's soul, is the sword that has ever been with the Church,

because the history of the Church of Christ is the history of a martyred Church. No, you and I are not likely to be martyred, and it is unlikely that we will ever be called upon to pass through what some of our forefathers were called upon to endure. We hope otherwise, but I do know that no-one escapes that sword. There is a sword piercing someone's soul now as you read these words; it could even be yours. It is the sword of sorrow, and anxiety and pain, all because of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. You would not be suffering that way if you had no connection with the gospel, and no faith in Christ. All of us, in one form or another, are called upon to shoulder that self same cross, are we not? Jesus said that anyone who does not take up his cross daily and follow Him, cannot be His disciple. In the words of the hymnist, "It is the way the master went; should not the servant tread it still?" It would be wise, therefore, especially at Christmas time, amidst joy and happiness, to remember the sword that it brought, the dreadful tragedy of the cross, and Mary's sorrow and agony as she stood weeping and remembered the words of Simeon. Let us never forget the sorrows and cries of the Lord's martyred Church down the centuries, our own conflict with evil, without and within, and the demands made upon patience, faith and endurance for Christ's sake. The sword has never left the Church, and never will until the Lord Himself comes again. It is by this means that He separates us from the world with all its deceits and delusions, and all the falseness that is in your soul and mine. And He sanctifies us unto Himself, for this is the reason why He came. Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Amen

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