

## Some words for our Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Week 2 - The Prophecy of Simeon

*'Sing we, too, of Mary's sorrows, of the sword that pierced her through,  
when beneath the cross of Jesus she his weight of suffering knew.'*<sup>1</sup>



### **Reading:**

*Luke 2:22-35*

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Forty days after his birth, seeking ritual purification, Mary and Joseph presented the infant Jesus in the Temple. Observing what is *'laid down by the law of Moses,'*<sup>2</sup> the couple would *'offer in sacrifice ... a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'*<sup>3</sup> Like many young couples today they had little money and their poverty is revealed to us by their offering; it being the minimum that was permitted. A whole lamb was prescribed for those who could afford it. With hindsight we might understand that Jesus was himself the lamb that was being offered but Mary and Joseph of course, would not have realised this. They did know however that there was something wondrous about the child, that much was already clear, and they were about to receive further confirmation of this fact through their encounter with the *'upright and devout man,'*<sup>4</sup> Simeon.

Simeon, a man whose name can be understood to mean *God-listener* or *God-receiver*, had been graced by the Holy Spirit, and *'It had been revealed to him ... that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord.'*<sup>5</sup> Having taken the infant Jesus into his arms he blessed God and declared that he could now *'go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see ... the glory of your people Israel.'*<sup>6</sup> In reflecting on this moment, Pope St John Paul II wrote, *'Simeon's words cast new light on the announcement which Mary had heard from the angel: Jesus is the Saviour, he is "a light for revelation" to mankind.'*<sup>7</sup> In other words Mary and Joseph hear something new for, although the angel Gabriel had revealed to Mary that her son was to be the Messiah, it is Simeon and then Anna who immediately grasped that Jesus is the Light of the World and *'the deliverance of Jerusalem.'*<sup>8</sup> Standing there, their minds reeling, *'wondering at the things that were being said about him,'*<sup>9</sup> Mary and Joseph were to hear still more.

Simeon's mind, further illuminated by the Spirit, had glimpsed something of the future. Blessing the couple, he told Mary that the child Jesus *'is destined for the fall and for the rising of many ... a sign that is to be rejected ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'*<sup>10</sup> Even after the passing of two millennia these words sting with sharp brutality; that's the way it sometimes is with truth. Continuing in his meditation of the scene Pope St John Paul II offered this thought, *'Simeon's words seem like a second Annunciation to Mary, for they tell her of the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish his mission, namely, in misunderstanding and sorrow ... [they] reveal to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Saviour, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful.'*<sup>11</sup>

In the Doctor Who episode *Silence in the Library*, the time-travelling Doctor meets a woman called River Song. River is also a time-traveller and, because they both are, their first meeting, each subject to their individual chronologies, is his first and her last. In every subsequent meeting the Doctor already knows River's fate. The writers of Doctor Who, with varying degrees of success, played around with a couple of stories that explored the idea that the Doctor, a Time Lord, who travels in the future, as well as the past, lives with the *certain* knowledge of the death of his current companions. Mary's knowledge was no more certain than that of parents today alas, when they are told that their child is terminally ill and will almost certainly die within so many months or years. Hope, even in the face of such terrible news is not easily extinguished, and, paradoxically, becomes itself part of the suffering borne. As the punctuality obsessed Mr Stimpson observed in the film, *Clockwise*, *'It's not the despair... I can take the despair. It's the hope I can't stand.'* We know Mary was

thoughtful and that she *'pondered'*<sup>12</sup> things; although Simeon foretold of a future sword we cannot doubt that it would have begun its dreadful work no sooner had the words left his mouth. Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, could not simply choose to accept the joyful aspects of God's revelation and ignore the rest.

Returning again, some years later, to this prophecy, Pope St John Paul II said, *'alongside Christ's suffering Simeon sets the vision of Mary's heart pierced by the sword, thus uniting the Mother with the sorrowful destiny of her Son. In this way, while the venerable old man foresees the growing hostility the Messiah will face, he stresses its repercussion on the Mother's heart. This maternal suffering will culminate in the Passion, when she will unite with her Son in his redemptive sacrifice.'*<sup>13</sup>

It is every parent's worst nightmare that they witness the death of their child and Mary's destiny is to acknowledge, and live with, the future loss of her child. Only Mary can know the weight that she bore. *'Beginning with Simeon's prophecy, Mary intensely and mysteriously unites her life with Christ's sorrowful mission: she was to become her Son's faithful co-worker for the salvation of the human race.'*<sup>14</sup> As she pondered and ruminated over the years, how much did she discern of God's plan for her son? This we will never know but we can pray that, like Mary, however we may meet the unfolding joys and sorrows of life we may still distinguish the loving face of God.

*'By your faith and loving accord, as the handmaid of the Lord,  
you undertook God's plan to embrace. Mary, we thank you, hail full of grace.  
Ave, ave, ave, Maria!'*<sup>15</sup>

Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

5 May 2020

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The photograph is of *The Presentation at the Temple*, Giovanni Bellini, circa. 1459, Galleria Querini Stampalia, Venice

1. *Sing we of the blessed Mother*, verse 2, G. B. Timms, d.1993

2. *Luke 2:22*

3. *Luke 2:24*

4. *Luke 2:25*

5. *Luke 2:26*

6. *Luke 2:29-32*
7. *Redemptoris Mater*, 16, Encyclical Letter, Pope St John Paul II, 25 March, 1987
8. *Luke 2:38*
9. *Luke 2:33*
10. *Luke 2:34-35*
11. *Redemptoris Mater*, 16
12. *Luke 2:19*
13. *General Audience*, 2, Pope St John Paul II, 18 December 1996
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Holy Virgin, by God's decree*, verse 2, J. P. Lécot, *tr.* W. R. Lawrence