

Faith In The Will

A Sermon by Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples" Luke 1:29-31.

Nearly everyone wants to believe. It is a need sown into the human soul, for there is an influx from God which disposes us to believe that He exists. We want to believe that there is such a thing as unselfish love, that there are true ideals that rise above personal inconvenience, that there is a heaven, worth longing for and striving for. We want to believe that there is a perfect God who offers us these things.

Most hero images manifest this deep longing to believe in a power greater than our own. Sometimes we transfer this image to other people. Young people have a tendency to choose an idol and expect him or her to be perfect, and then become disillusioned when faults appear. People become inordinately hopeful about their national leaders or heroes. They treat them as super-beings, who will miraculously give them freedom from hunger or poverty, give them employment, peace, no inflation, no crime. How many times has a nation heralded a new leader with unnatural fervor, and turned on him a few months later because, like everyone else, he has human flaws?

This longing of the human heart, to believe in a savior, was fulfilled when the Lord came down to earth. It was for this purpose that He came, so that He could show Himself as the one perfect Man--God-man. Only He can fulfill the need within us for a complete trust.

He had no flaws. He did not put a foot wrong in all that He did on earth, nor did He show anything but the most perfect love and wisdom. Much though we love a human being, however deeply we revere a wife or husband or parent or friend, we cannot trust him or her altogether. There will be areas in which her love or his wisdom is not equal to helping us. But in Jesus we see infinite qualities at work, and we are able to say with Simeon, "My eyes have seen Your salvation." In our faith in the Lord is our hope, and our security.

It is that certainty, that faith, which is meant by Simeon's words, when he held the infant Lord, and knew that this was the moment for which he

had been kept alive. He prayed to die: "Now let Your servant depart in peace." For the longing to believe is with us only for a time. When we discover faith in the Lord, then the wish to believe dies. It departs--in peace--because it has done its job, and its time has passed.

Yet Simeon does not represent simple faith in the Lord and His power. For faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a powerful and comforting thing, but it is not effective if it is a belief in the Lord as Someone standing outside of us. It is the sense of the Lord within us, coming to be born in our hearts, that matters. The first faith a person has is an intellectual picture, the mental vision of his God. But the understanding is not the person himself. We are the things we love.

Therefore the Lord comes to us in our wills, in our hearts, and Simeon, that just and devout man who longed to see Jesus with the eyes of his body represents our wish to have the Lord within us. In the internal sense of the Word, Simeon (whose name is taken from the word "hearing") represents faith in our will, faith working in our lives, so that the Lord can dwell in us.

What do we know of the Simeon story? He was just and devout, and he was waiting, longing, for the "consolation of Israel." Because of this, the Holy Spirit had promised him that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Christ. He was led of the spirit into the temple to worship at just the time that Jesus was presented there, and in this infant he recognized the salvation of all people. He took Jesus up in his arms, and blessed God.

These actions represent a state of mind in us which follows after we already have an intellectual faith in the Lord. For Simeon was already a believer, and he was just and devout. He was putting into practice the things he believed. When faith is put into practice, it becomes "faith in the will," faith in act, the wish to make our religion a reality (AC 342; 3862; 5472; 3869; 3872). Simeon also represents obedience, for obedience is the willing subjection of our will to the Lord's truth (AC 6238).

To understand Simeon's part in the Christmas story, it is important to reflect on the abiding emotion which ruled his life. For Simeon knew that it was his lot to remain on this earth until the promised Messiah came. His days were filled with hope, and with eager anticipation of this most wondrous event. This spirit, of hope leading into anticipation, is what

keeps us going between the time of our first obedience to the Lord until charity, or true love is born in our hearts. The Writings say that hope is of the understanding, but confidence (or anticipation) is of the will (AC 6577, 6578). It comes about when we trust the Lord with our hearts.

There is a wait between the start of our obedience, and the birth of true love. Simeon waited for the consolation of Israel. How long did he wait? Probably for a long time. But was it an anxious wait? No. Was it a wait filled with uncertainty? No. He knew: the Holy Spirit had told him that his waiting would come to an end.

In our own lives nothing worth having comes to us in a moment. The truly worthwhile joys, the satisfying experiences in life take time. When did you first fall in love? How long was it from that day until your marriage? When did you first decide on a career? How long was it from the time you dreamed of owning a house until you inhabited it? A baby takes nine months to grow before you can hold it.

But the time between the beginning of the dream and its realization is pleasant. At first there is hope. Then hope gives way to something even better--a knowledge that the thing you dream about is going to happen. Two lovers plan their wedding: now they know it is going to happen. They still have to wait, but they are not anxious. That period of waiting, when you are certain of the end, is an important period. Each day that you wait, you reflect on the importance of your dream, of its special nature. The wait increases the delight in the final goal, and makes it more satisfying when it becomes a reality. In fact, if we were to gain our important wishes too quickly, without the pleasure of anticipation, much of the joy would not be there. More important, we would not have gone through the preparation which makes the joy meaningful; and even more important, we would not have used our own reason, in freedom, to prepare for that event, so that there is something of the as- from-self in the experience of the event. It is the wait that allows the Lord to give us a part in the joy that we experience. The Lord gives gifts, and through waiting and planning and looking forward to them, we have a part in their creation.

This principle applies when we start to seek the Lord's love. Obedience is the beginning, but there is a long way to go. We don't change from being selfish people to being loving people in a moment. We learn, step by step, and each step is a discovery. It is an adventure. It brings its own satisfaction.

The feeling which Simeon represents is the certainty that if we obey, love will be ours. Tomorrow, or maybe for many tomorrows to come, we may show signs of the selfishness that is still within us, but the time will come when unselfish love is born in us. The Holy Spirit has said so. We know it.

That waiting period is not an unhappy one. A person who is obedient to the Lord has some immediate rewards. He or she has a clear conscience. There is satisfaction in each day's work. There is a feeling of accomplishment in fighting a weakness and overcoming it. There is real pleasure in finding growing kindness in one's self. There are moments of quiet reflection and prayer when there is thankfulness that the future is going to be good.

It's just that we do not yet have the love which makes heaven. The Lord has not yet been born inside us.

How did Simeon picture the meeting that he would have with His Messiah? How many times he must have imagined it! What was his mental vision? We don't know, but we suspect that nothing prepared him for the joy which overwhelmed him when the infant Lord was brought into the temple and he had the privilege of holding Him in his arms.

We talk of unselfish love, but when it begins to be felt in our hearts, it is going to be much better than we had imagined it.

Simeon asked to die. Why? Because the spirit of anticipation has a limited life. Faith in the will lasts only so long, because when true love is born, faith becomes love, and faith flows from that love. We no longer look forward to charity, it is here, now. Hope, even certain hope, dies when its goal is reached (DP 178). "Now, Lord, you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to Your word. For my eyes have seen!" It has happened.

Like Simeon, we will spend a lot of our lives waiting for something. We are born to love others, and to find joy in loving them unselfishly. At some moment in our lives we believe the promise of the Lord that it can be so, and we begin to obey. But there is a long wait before love becomes a reality. We are invited to enjoy that wait, to find happiness and contentment in it. We are invited to use our reason and our planning and our activity--our freedom!--to look forward to the day when

love is a reality. It is into that freedom that the Lord inspires hope, and then confidence, and eager anticipation (see AC 6577, 6578). It gives us the power to go forward, waiting for the consolation that will surely come. "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lamentations 3:26). "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word do I hope.. for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption" (Psalm 130:5-7). Amen

Lessons: 1. Psalm 130; 2. Luke 2:22-35; 3. DP 178