

THE CONSOLATION OF ISRAEL



Luke 2.25 "Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel."

In today's Gospel reading, pious, old Simeon believes he has found the consolation of Israel in the baby Jesus, who had been brought by his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem 40 days after his birth, to be presented unto the Lord, in accordance with the Law of Moses, "every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord." And so Simeon, having been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah, took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, what later generations of Christians would call the *Nunc*

Dimittis, that haunting canticle, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel."

But did Simeon really find what he was looking for? Did Jesus really herald any consolation for Israel? For Jesus did not end the Roman occupation of the Holy Land. Jesus did not end the oppression of the Jewish people, a people who have been subjugated and persecuted, not for centuries, but for millennia. Ever since their escape from slavery in Egypt, the identity of the Jewish people has been forged by oppression. And they have endured the domination of empire after empire; the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans. What other race in history has endured even a fraction of what the Jewish people have suffered at the hands of others. Yet in time all their conquerors have been swallowed up by history, and the Jews have remained. In the Middle Ages there were innumerable massacres of Jews by Christians themselves. Was Jesus really a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel? Edward I drove the Jews out of England in the 14th century. Ferdinand and Isabel banished them from Spain in the 15th century. They have been hunted and persecuted into this very century. And it is our generation that tried what was

called "the Final Solution" to the ancient presence of the Jews: their systematic extermination. Six million of them were killed by the Nazis in gas ovens and firing ditches. And now Hitler has gone the way of all flesh, but the Jews remain. Yet where is their consolation?

Down the ages the Jews have called out in worship to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, yes to the God of Jesus and Peter and Paul. And it is tragic to acknowledge that most of the Jewish persecutions in the last two thousand years have been instigated by Christians. One of the great ironies of history has been the persecution of the people of the Old Covenant by the people of the New Covenant. But why? Why has this happened if Jesus was indeed the consolation of Israel that Simeon and Anna confirmed in today's Gospel reading?

The Christian persecution of the Jews would seem centered on different understandings of that great Jewish longing for a Messiah. Woven into the fabric of Jewish history has been an unquenchable expectation that God's anointed one would one day come and rescue them from all their suffering and sorrow. He would restore them to their own land and usher in a reign of peace, as in the days of Good King David. All the sufferings of the centuries would be vindicated. All of it would be redeemed. All the tears would be wiped away. Creation would be bathed in the righteousness and justice of God. It is a vision that

touches deep within the human heart. It is the vision that sustained and still sustains millions of Jews. Like Simeon, they wait for the consolation of Israel.

Though the aged Simeon saw this salvation in the person of Jesus, few of his fellow-Jews did. Few of the Jews in Jesus' day saw their messianic expectations fulfilled in the man from Nazareth, and who can blame them? Jesus did not redeem the world in any immediately recognizable way, as they had hoped. There was no dramatic inauguration of God's kingdom on earth. Jesus himself was a victim of the world's still unredeemed ways. If Jesus was the consolation Israel waited for, then it was a strange and contradictory consolation he brought. Little wonder that his own people knew him not. Most of the Jews rejected Christian messianic claims about Jesus then as they do now. And since the early Middle Ages Christians have retaliated against the Jews for their rejection of Jesus. But aren't the Jews right anyway, to reject Jesus as the messiah, as the consolation of Israel, as the world's redeemer? It would seem that history as well as our own personal experience would falsify those grandiose Christian claims. For I'm afraid that I for one don't feel particularly redeemed at times. There has been no dramatic rescue by Jesus snatching me away from my own sin and weakness. And I don't see redemption in very many others around me, either. Christians are far from immune to the pains and sorrows

of life, and the sins and follies and crimes of Christendom provide even more dramatic proof that we are still searching for redemption, still longing for the consolation of Israel, still waiting with Simeon and Anna for the one who is to come.

And in the midst of that longing for a redeemer, I hear echoed two passages from the Christian Scriptures that haunt me. First are the words of John the Baptist. After he openly baptized Jesus and twice declared him as the Lamb of God before his disciples on the streets of Bethany, John was himself arrested and thrown into Herod's prison. From his dungeon cell, John sent word through his disciples to Jesus asking the simple question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" "Are you the one we are looking for, or not?" he asks. Jesus enigmatically answered John's inquiry with a quotation from Isaiah about the blind seeing and the dumb hearing, and then Jesus added a poignant little postscript, "and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Blessed is he who takes no offense at me. Blessed is he who is not disappointed in me, whose hopes are not dashed to pieces because I have not come as expected, because I did not fulfil their expectations for redemption. Indeed, shortly after Jesus spoke these words, John the Baptist was beheaded. And Jesus was himself crucified not long thereafter. The followers of Jesus were themselves mocked and scourged, chained and imprisoned. They were stoned and sawn

in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, says the Epistle to the Hebrews. What kind of redemption is that? Is Jesus or is he not, the one who is to come? Is he the consolation of Israel? John's question still lingers in the air for me.

And then I hear another passage of Scripture, words from Jesus himself announcing that "The kingdom of heaven is within you." The kingdom of God is within. Jesus offers a redemption wrought from the inside out, and not vice versa. This promised reign of God was to be found in our hearts, not in our lands. Jesus was saying something dark and ungraspable, about a kingdom within us which is impervious to whatever this world throws at us, or takes from us. He was saying something about our deliverance coming at the moment we recognize that there is no deliverance of the sort we long for. He was saying something to that awes and amazes, like the moment when there is no hope anymore, and yet we hope against it still.

This is not the kind of redemption that the world imagines, it was not what the Jews were looking for, and it is not what we as Christians are often searching for. It is a peace which surpasses all humans understanding, a peace that was present when John's head fell into the basket and when the nails tore through Jesus' own soft flesh. It was present when young Stephen

was stoned by the angry mob in Jerusalem and when Agnes was torn apart by wild beasts. I can find no other words to express the paradox of Jesus, that suffering servant, that wounded redeemer, save that by acceptance of this paradoxical truth we will be blessed; blessed if we are not offended at the way the world is and has to be; blessed if we are not crushed by the knowledge that our deliverance is not a deliverance from the prison, but a deliverance within the prison, so that the prison ceases to confine us, to limit our real self. This is the strength of those who wait and endure and know that we are held gently in the hands of God even as we suffer and sorrow. This is the real consolation of Israel, discovering the kingdom of heaven within us. Amen.