

Numbers 6-22+
Galatians 4-4+
Luke 2;21-35

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer....

Welcome, and I hope you had a great Christmas.

Christmas!

It's a holiday time for many, and I was recently having an interesting chat about holidays with a respected lawyer in a club, not far from here. He shared with me that a certain destination was on his 'bucket list'.

It's not an expression I espouse. But at my age, I am certainly minded of my own mortality and that there's not much time to tick off some of the things I've always wanted to see or do before kicking the proverbial bucket (what a ghastly expression!).

One of the most familiar texts of the New Testament is this one, from Luke about the encounter with Simeon, especially if you come to Choral Evensong based on the 1662 Prayer Book.

The passage is also widely known as the naming of Jesus: interesting in that his name was actually Yeheshua, Yehoshua, or Yeshua, (Hebrew doesn't have vowels), and Jesus is a romanisation.

But this text begs the question, is it just all about just ticking off something on *Simeon's* bucket list, or is there something else going on?

And as you've heard me say so frequently, the seemingly familiar texts can be dangerous because time and circumstance can easily erode the significance that the writer was endeavouring to achieve. To grasp the message for C21 NZ we need first to unravel the message as C1 people would have heard it.

And indeed there is much of significance here, especially about the early church after Jesus' crucifixion.

Crucifixion?.....He's only eight days old here!

The key to unlocking it here is that Luke wasn't writing for his oeuvres to be collected as parts of a bigger volume, that which we now call the New Testament, and certainly wasn't writing expecting that another story would be injected in the middle of his efforts. The Gospel attributed to John has been inserted between what we now call the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, yet when he was writing Luke was putting in specific and deliberate resonances throughout his account which are now much less apparent due to the hiatus of the story having been split.

So to summarise what is going on here, Luke is using the story of Simeon as an ending to the birth narrative but as a precursor to his account of the early 'church' in the book of Acts. And as you have already guessed, it is packed with significant phrases, and it really is very much more than an expression of Simeon's bucket list..... and, dare I opine, very much more relevant in Nelson to you and me at the threshold of 2025.

So this final section of the infancy narrative starts with a major motif: the statement of Jewish Orthodoxy; the presentation at the temple and circumcision.

Indeed, the whole passage is infused with references to the Torah:

the purification

the presentation of the firstborn

the sacrifice

the parents doing what was 'customary under the Law'

Indeed there are only nine references to the Mosaic Law in the whole Gospel, and five of them are here!

So Luke is making abundantly clear to the C1 hearer that the Holy Family come from a conservative and devout background and are not acting in any way contrary to The Law, which I'd rather call the Jewish Tradition at that time.

The first reading from Numbers (read by....) is there to remind us of the Mosaic Law in Jewish tradition: and the second reading, (by) from the letter to the Galatians written before the Gospel of Luke, emphasises those things: born of a woman, born under the Law, in order to redeem those who were under the Law.

So according to Jewish tradition, Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day: he is given the name Yehoshua, as stipulated by the angel, and Mary and Joseph offer two pigeons, the cheaper alternative to a lamb (think of all the significance of the sacrificial lamb as the story moves to Easter). With all of this emphasis on orthodoxy, Luke is already refuting what he will record in Acts that the Jewish establishment railed (against Stephen and Paul) that Jesus will destroy things and change the customs given down by Moses.

Then Simeon is introduced as a righteous and devout man infused with the Holy Spirit: another very significant reference to the Spirit long before the baptism of Jesus and an acknowledgment of the Spirit acting through orthodox Jews: Luke is reiterating the fact that Jesus (and later John the Baptist) are operating *under* Mosaic Law, NOT upturning it.

Subsequently we launch into the most familiar bit, the Nunc Dimittis as Luke's conclusion of the birth narrative but NOT of the overture, which ends with the adolescent Jesus in the temple.

The Nunc splits into two distinct parts.

Remember Luke was writing *after* Paul, and most probably after Paul's death.

The first part deliberately resonates with Paul's speech in Antioch (recorded by Luke in Acts 13:47) about being a light to the gentiles, and with the conclusion to Acts "this salvation of God has been sent to the gentiles". Luke is cleverly opening the thought patterns of the reader or hearer; Jesus, from an orthodox Jewish background is for ALL of the nations, not just the Jews.....a fundamental and startling observation for the C1 hearer, most especially for JEWISH C1 hearers, who considered themselves the chosen people of God, despite the predictions in Isaiah (42:6 and 49:6). Our familiarity with this concept mustn't erode the enormity of this radical message that would have spread horror to the religious establishment. It's Luke's introduction to the theme of Paul in Acts being the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Simeon's second blessing turns to Mary. Mary who Luke just described as having 'pondered things in her heart' at the annunciation. Mary and Joseph were *amazed* at Simeon's words.

But then his prediction is the opening of yet another thread that Luke will take up as the story unfolds. It foreshadows both the acceptance and rejection of Jesus and the Gospel Messengers (Luke goes on to describe how Jesus first recorded sermon leads to angry rejection, yet his advice to Peter about catching fish is accepted). Of course the book of Acts is also littered with stories of the Apostles being both accepted and rejected.

And in a final prediction, Simeon predicts the grief of Mary. A grief few of us could imagine, when her innocent son, born of the Holy Spirit is cruelly executed under Roman law to appease the Jewish establishment.

So it's a bit more than a resolution of Simeon's bucket list.

This is a very clever account by Luke, introducing these concepts into the mind of the reader.

Yehoshua's orthodox background,

Yehoshua will be a divisive figure

He is here for ALL of the nations

His followers will also be divisive

So does this radical message, as heard by C1 ears, translate to us in 2024, nearly 2025?

Of *course* it does: indeed it becomes almost self explanatory now.

Yehoshua, Jesus, an orthodox Jew by birth and infant nurture is a divisive figure and His followers will also be divisive. We are all called to eschew those things that the outside world holds dear, like status, rank and fortune and espouse those things that bring everlasting peace, satisfaction and salvation. We are called upon to live differently from many of the folk we encounter walking down Trafalgar Street.

But the biggy here is Luke introducing that concept in the Nunc: to be a light to the gentiles. The birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Christ is a source of light to all of us. Here we no longer encounter the God of the chosen peoples, but instead the God of us all. Jesus' death and resurrection are yours, and are even mine, despite my own sinfulness.

What a message that we might fail to hear as the familiar words of the Nunc Dimittis wash over us.

And what about the dreaded bucket list? Or specifically MY bucket list.

Well, I can only answer for myself. I recognise that I need to absorb more of the scriptures; that I might be better equipped when I stand naked before the same Yehoshua, devoid of rank, devoid of status, and endeavour to give an account of my conduct through life to the man-God who suffered on my behalf.

Thank God for Jesus.

Amen.