

# First Sunday after Christmas, Gospel, Year B

GOD'S HEART REVEALED

Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday after Christmas

Analysis by Paul Jaster

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

## DIAGNOSIS: Our Hearts Revealed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Not Looking, Therefore, Not Seeing

Simeon and Anna are the exception to the rule. Not many (including me) look for the promised “consolation of Israel,” as patiently and longingly as Simeon and Anna did well into their golden ages. We look for consolation elsewhere. In a rising stock market. In the political victories of people we adore. In a promotion on the job. In a family that surrounds and cares for us. In tax relief and adequate social services. In medical miracles. In the lottery. In comfort food, drugs or intoxicating drink. Consequently, we do not see in the child Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel: the salvation of all people, light to the gentiles and glory for God’s people Israel. We do not cradle in our arms the close, sweet-smelling presence of God in our everyday affairs.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Our Inner Thoughts Revealed

Is the birth of Jesus comforting or disturbing? With Simeon's blessing of Mary & Joseph comes a warning. This child is like a long, broad two-edged sword that severs and divides. And people today as people then have seen their share of long, sharp two-edged swords. The reception or non-reception of Jesus shows where hearts really are before God, including Mary's. For her heart will waver, too. Jesus exposes those who don't believe fully and completely. All of the anger and anxiety, the violence, disgust, and worry that we see in the world today (and have within our hearts) are signs that Jesus is opposed, resisted, and dismissed. We do not yet have in our hearts the full and complete peace and consolation Jesus was sent to bring.

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Seeing Death before Seeing Jesus

We see death and dying all around, especially seniors like me who check the obits every day to see whether or not our name is included. But what do we hold in our hearts and arms first, primarily? What do we think of first in our "inner thoughts?" Death or the Lord's Messiah? "Jesus forces choices," Spirit-filled Simeon says. Eternal ones. Those who fail to see in Jesus God's agent of healing are headed for a fall, a humbling. While those who receive him in faith will be raised up, exalted. For those who resist Jesus, Jesus is not a sign of God's long-lived promises fulfilled. That sign is reserved for those who received him the way Simeon and Anna did.

### PROGNOSIS: God's Heart Revealed

### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Consoled and Comforted by Jesus

The birth of Jesus also reveals the heart, the "inner thoughts," of God. Jesus (not Torah nor temple) is God's salvation prepared in the presence of all peoples, light to the Gentiles and glory to the original people of the promise, Israel. Jesus is born for

us and for our salvation...including folks like you and me. For the first time in Luke's message, Jesus' mission is related to the gentiles, too. Promise fulfilled. All will see and benefit. God intends to extend to all the consolation and compassion Jesus brings. Even though the road to Jesus' coronation will involve a cross and be down a path of pain. And even though that might be a stumbling stone for many who wander in the dark, Jesus-the-humble child of Bethlehem and Jesus crucified becomes Jesus-the-exalted-one. Jesus is God's good-news intervention in a bad-news world. In the middle of the night, on the longest night of the year, the time of deepest darkness, Jesus is born. In the Bible "salvation" is not so much about going to heaven, but rather God's here-and-now rescue, deliverance, liberation, protection, and being made whole for us and other people. The gift of the cross, the gift of light in darkness, glows with liberation from bondage, return from exile, justice replacing injustice, peace silencing violence, truth overcoming falsehood, and life out of death.

#### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Seeing Jesus before Seeing Death

Through the Holy Spirit, God gave to Simeon the most precious promise of them all—that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. And that is the same awesome gift that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Paraclete, gives to us when we see Jesus in the same manner that Simeon and Anna did. We do not see death first either at our doorstep or at our end of years or in the world around us. We see Jesus. We see Jesus first and last. The Alpha and Omega. The A and the Z. We see God in the person of this holy cross-bound child working to bring hope and peace to our troubled world. And we see that the crucified and risen Lord will lift us up into his arms whenever we stumble or fall, whether that be a minor misstep or our final tumble into death. Whether we realize it as Anna and Simeon did,

we all are looking for Jesus, in one way or another.

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Praising God & Speaking about Jesus to All

The octogenarian Anna shows us that seeing and receiving God in Jesus leads to praise and proclamation. It is that Promise-Fulfillment-Peace-Praise-and-Proclaim chain. The moment that Anna saw Jesus, she began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the comfort that God promised. And that is our joyful response, too, when we take heart in seeing Jesus for who he is—the comforting presence, nearness, and power of God—Light to the nations and glory to all the people of God's promise. Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth.