

A Tale of Two Halves
Psalm 148, Luke 2:22-40

31 December 2017

As we first gather after the Christmas celebration, I trust that you have been touched in some way by the wonder of the new-born baby in all his vulnerability and sensed something of the love and warmth of this holy season. I was grateful that I was able to join my family in Hungary for Christmas, but before I went I had the opportunity to see a film about the life of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. One of his interesting observations was that, as opposed to the rest of our human body, our eyes do not age. They are mirrors of our souls and the soul does not age. Well, if this is true, it may be good news for those of us, who are all too aware of the many, unflattering changes the rest of our body has to go through as we get older! But whether it is true or not, one thing is certain, the way we see *with our eyes* does change over the span of our lives. The way we see now may be quite different from the way we saw things when we were 15 or 20 years old.

On this last day of the year we have been given the Gospel reading, which unfolds for us the story of Simeon and the aged Anna. These two prophetic figures are on a threshold of time, just as we are, with open vistas to the past as well as to the future. From that vantage point they can see something in the infant Jesus presented at the Temple that his younger parents, or anybody else around him, could not see. And if we turn to 'one of the great prophets' of our civilization, the 17th c Dutch artist, Rembrandt, we find a good visual example of this. Rembrandt has left behind a rich heritage of religious paintings, which show his great knowledge of the Bible, his understanding of classical artistic composition and most of all a deep empathy for the human condition. Because of all this his works illuminate the Biblical texts with imagination and truly Spirit-inspired insights.

For some reason during his lifetime Rembrandt had returned again and again to the story of Simeon. One can only speculate as to what drew him to the subject, unless he saw some parallel between Simeon holding in his arms the Christ child of great promise and himself, the artist holding in his hands the divine gift of art. Today we are going to look at two of Rembrandt's pictures based on the text in Luke's Gospel we've heard just now read to us by Margaret. I have chosen one of them from the beginning and the other from the end of the artist's life and career. I did it, because they beautifully illustrate the two stages of life that Richard Rohr, the well-known Franciscan monk and theologian talks about in his book 'Falling Upward'. Our church's reading group have read this book together a couple years ago and we have all learnt a lot from it. According to Rohr these two stages follow

one another in our lives, and although they are quite different, they are equally important and they also influence our life of faith.



When we come to look at the pictures the best known of the two is the one called 'Simeon with the Christ child in the Temple'. This is a painting dated 1669, the last year of the Artist's life. It was found unfinished in his studio the day after his death. It is an old man's vision of an old man's preparation for the end of life. It is what Richard Rohr would call a 'second-stage-of-life' painting, and we'll come to it in a minute, what that means. But before then it brings us to the first point I want to raise from Luke's story.

What we notice in this account is that the characters centre-stage, are people of advanced age, people, whose 'doing' years had now passed, who had left behind most of the joys and struggles of their lives, who cannot engage in 'active service' any more. They do not feature in the main Christmas stories, they are on the peripheries. Alongside the other vulnerable groups we have met so far, the homeless parents with a new-born child, the animals, who are the only ones giving room to them, the hardworking, tired shepherds, we now meet these old people. Yet, Luke, the Gospel writer gives them leading roles in this post-Christmas message. So, let us do the same. Let us think about older people. Perhaps, we can begin by asking ourselves, does our society, does our church community value enough their older members? Or do we only count until we are able to contribute in some tangible way? And if so, what can we do about it?



But, returning to the pictures, what is lesser known is that Rembrandt had already tackled the subject of Simeon at the beginning of his career, and produced a painting of it in 1631 when he was only 25, called *Simeon's Song of Praise*. If we follow Rohr's guidance, we could call it a 'first-stage-of-life' painting. The young artist, who is still unmarried at this time, is in the process of establishing himself, making a name for himself. He had clearly studied the main representatives of renaissance art and faithfully followed their tradition. Simeon is there, Jesus is there and so are his parents, but the painter takes great care and obvious joy in showing off the magnificent surroundings as well. The

elaborate columns of the Temple signify the importance of the venue; they also serve as boundaries that separate the sacred space from the every-day, humdrum part of life. The infant Jesus is clearly the source of the light that illuminates the picture, he is the 'Light that will bring revelation to the Gentiles' and 'glory to the people of Israel', but he is tiny within the composition, providing a great contrast with the figure of the priest, who occupies the centre of the painting. His beautifully painted garment and head-dress, surrounded by other Temple officials, provide the 'liturgical' frame to the event. His arms are raised in blessing and they show the acceptance of the baby within the traditional structures of the Jewish family of faith. Here Rembrandt picks up on Luke's three-fold repetition of references to the 'law' (in accordance with the law, ...as prescribed in the law, ...as stated in the law).

These are also the characteristics of the so-called 'first-stage-of-life' faith. At this stage, we build the outer 'container' of our faith, as Rohr calls it. We are concerned with our identity as Christians, and we like to think of ourselves as different from others. Traditions, buildings, creeds, symbols, badges, correct rituals are very important for us and we like the clearly drawn boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the black and white divides between right and wrong decisions, and so on. Rohr's observation is that though this is a crucial building stage, sadly many of us Christians remain at this stage for the rest of our lives. But we know that at some point Christmas is over, the decorations will soon come down and the last notes of our favourite carols die out for another year. Yet, today's message and my second point is that after Christmas, after the first stage of life, there is a further journey to be done, we have to grow up. 'The child grew big and strong and full of wisdom...' says the last verse of our reading and in order that we may grow up in our faith, we are called to let the Christ child grow in our hearts and minds too.

Rembrandt's life has progressed as well after that early painting. He had grown in stature as an artist, he had started to taste success, he got married and was heading for a full and rewarding life. Then disaster struck. Within 8 years he lost three of his four children and his wife, who was only 30. In the next 25 years his artistic achievements grew and grew, there seemed no end to his creativity, but in his personal life he had to face financial ruin, the loss of his second wife and finally the death of his only remaining son, Titus at the age of 27. It was in the year following his son's death he painted and significantly left unfinished our second picture just before he himself died.

Compared with the previous, beautifully completed work, this one is unfinished, telling us that the artist's search for the truth has never really ended. It concentrates on the bare essentials, no trappings, no buildings, no witnessing crowds, just the two central figures in all their vulnerability. At this second stage of

life it is possible to live with imperfections as we learn to see what is really important. This time the light comes from outside the picture, from the top left - hand corner lighting up both Simeon and the baby. It is God's light that embraces both the man at the end of his life and the infant, who is just beginning his. A new baby always ages us but at the same time it is always another step towards the hopeful acceptance of our own limited existence within the gracious care of our God for whom the old is as precious as the young. We've just heard the good news about the joy in the Swann family and we congratulate Wendy and Andrew on the birth of their first grandchild, Isabella, Kathleen, who was born three days before Christmas. And we know of other families in our church who have similarly been blessed in recent weeks. In my family it was a 10 week old baby who stole the lime light this Christmas. His name is Nimrod, which would have pleased Elgar of the Enigma variations fame. As you can imagine no-one was more delighted at his arrival than his great-grand mother, who is in her 90-s.

Simeon's hands are quite prominent in this picture; they are rough working hands that can work no more. But they can and eager to hold the precious cargo of the new-born Saviour. And though Simeon's eyes are now the eyes of a nearly blind person, with his inner vision he can see in the child the fulfilment of ancient promises and that makes him sing out in thanksgiving. My third point is that when we can not 'do' very much any more, this is an important activity we can still engage in: we can share the vision and wisdom of old age, because of the richness of our life-experience, we can draw useful conclusions, see the bigger picture and above all we can sing, pray and say our praises to God with thanksgiving. The new life Simeon holds in his hands puts a new complexion on all that has gone before. And as we heard Rembrandt knew a lot about all that: the successes, the struggles, the heart-ache, the deep personal losses, all made their mark. With his marvellous artistry he shows it all in Simeon's face. Yet, that light from the top left-hand corner lightens up the well-worn face and surrounds it with a golden glow. And it does not only illuminate the present, it tidies up the past and makes it acceptable as well as providing great hope for the future, whatever it may hold. My hope and prayer on this New Year's Eve is that regardless of our physical age, we might get closer to this 'second-stage' of our spiritual life in the coming year.

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