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Did You Have a Good Christmas?¹

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Text: Luke 2:29–32

Two days after Christmas I went into a hardware store. As I paid my bill the cashier asked: “Did you have a good Christmas?”

Her question is to all of us today: “Did you have a good Christmas?” Well, I suppose it depends what is meant by “a good Christmas”. Did you get enough presents? Did you give enough? Were you disappointed? Did you disappoint? Were you well and healthy? Did your family come to see you? Did you go to see them? Was the Christmas dinner good? Or was it spoiled in some way?

But even if we are able to say: Yes, everything was perfect. I gave and I received, we were together and enjoyed each other’s company. Even if everything was perfect in that way, was it a real Christmas for you? Was it good? Did you see the Child in the Manger? Did you learn who he is? Did you take him into your arms and praise God, as Simeon did? For if you didn’t, then your Christmas was useless and lost, in the eternal sense.

Simeon shows us how to celebrate Christmas properly: He took the child in his arms and praised God for the salvation which God had given his people. Simeon witnessed to the goodness and love of God which he held in his arms.

Before Christmas [1990] there was the little controversy about a school somewhere in Metro Toronto. Teachers and parents at that school had decided to forgo the traditional Christmas concert and not to sing Christmas carols, for non-Christian students might be upset by it.

The Toronto *Star* editorialized against the decision, and one of the decision makers wrote a letter to the editor in which she stated that they had finally brought the real world into the school.

I wanted to respond to her and say: All right already! So you brought the real world into the school. Now bring the real world into the shopping plazas and stop them from blaring Christmas carols over their PA systems from Halloween onward. The secular Christmas songs offend me as a Christian, and the Christian Christmas carols offend non-Christians. Stop it already. For the only purpose such Christmas carols seem to have these days is to put people in the mood to spend money.

The CBC had a post-Christmas show on Radio Noon. The question was directed to retailers: Did you have a good Christmas? How were your sales this year, compared to the previous year's? Christmas has become a way to make extra money. May God help us!

There is another side to this, and of this other side I will speak presently. But first we look at our text and see what happened: Simeon saw a baby in the temple. The Holy Spirit said to him: This is the Redeemer! Simeon was confronted by a six-week-old infant, and he hailed and received this infant as the Messiah, the Christ, the Redeemer of the world.

If you were in church at Christmas you too were confronted by the same infant. The Holy Spirit spoke to you and said: This is Christ the Lord! He is the light of the world!

You had become Simeon or Hannah, the old prophetess, who also saw the child in the temple.

There they stood, saw the child, and recognized their Lord and Savior. From this we learn the first work of the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit gives faith and faith makes people recognize their Savior. For we, with our own eyes, can see only a child, but not recognize who he is.

We speak of a child's potential, what she or he might yet become, because children are not yet what they can and will be. But with the Christchild it is different: He is the Christ, he is God's Son, he is even now what he shall be. Simeon's joy was not born from what this child might become and bring. His praise expresses a present reality. He says praising God: "Lord, you may now set your servant free in peace, as you

have said. For my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all the people.”

Simeon considered God's promise fulfilled when he took the baby Jesus into his arms. The ancient promise of salvation, the promise of the removal of the destructive power of evil, is fulfilled the moment he laid his eyes on the child. In peace he is prepared to be dismissed. His task is completed. He has seen the child, he has witnessed to him. His salvation is complete. Nothing is lacking. For he has seen with his eyes, believed with his heart, and expressed his faith with his mouth.

As many of us as were in church on Christmas have been confronted with the Christchild. We heard of him. We sang of him. We read in scripture of him. We couldn't have avoided him if we had wanted too.

But are we prepared to say with Simeon: “I am now ready to depart from this life in peace, for my salvation has been accomplished”?

I am sure that the temple fairly bustled with people that day; that many parents and their child came to bring the prescribed sacrifice for the purification of the mother. Many people must have jostled Mary or Joseph as they carried Jesus in their arms. Many must have looked at the infant. But only Simeon and Hannah recognized him. Only these two old fogies saw anything but a screaming child. They followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saw and believed. Only these two took a second look. Only these two gave the Holy Spirit room to create faith in them.

For this is how the Holy Spirit works: the Holy Spirit shows the gift of God to us. We are told of Christ, we are shown Christ. We all are. It happens in the presence of all people. The salvation which God has prepared for human-kind was carried visibly into the temple. Simeon and Hannah testified to it audibly. All who saw the child and heard the two old people, had been told, had seen the Christchild, the salvation of God.

This is the other side of Christmas today: Even though people try to eliminate carolling and the Christchild, calling Christmas a “winter festival” instead, they all jostle the Christchild and his parents. The carols testify to him and people must know of the Christchild and of the salvation he brings.

No one can say they had not heard of Christ as long as they live in a country where Christmas is celebrated. God makes salvation known to all people!

But where acceptance of salvation is lacking, where faith is not fostered and fed, there remains the same state which existed before Christ came: one of distance to, and alienation from, God.

They know of Christ, but they do not believe. They hear, but do not take to heart. They see, but do not believe their eyes. They distort Christmas. They speak of peace on earth while they prepare for war. They speak of good will toward each other, while they think of how to cut each other down. They speak of feeding the hungry, while their whole life-style is directed toward exploiting and stealing from the poorest of the poor. They say anything at Christmas which will give them an extra buck. They will do anything which will advance their cause. They will pretend anything for their own glorification.

Compare this to the Christchild, the eternal God, who comes into the world. He is subject to the law. Everything is done in accordance with the laws of purification and circumcision. He is subject to the whims of people. He is a true human being, and yet under the human exterior is the living God fully present.

The natural eye cannot see him, the natural ear cannot hear him. Only the eye lighted by the Holy Spirit can see him; only the ear opened by the Holy Spirit can hear of him. Only the arms of faith can pick him up, and only a heart of faith can contain him.

Without this faith he is totally useless to us. We may set up a thousand Christmas trees, five thousand manger scenes, give ten thousand Christmas gifts and send a hundred thousand Christmas cards. Unless we see Christ with the eyes of faith and hear him with the ears of faith, hold him in the arms of faith and contain him in a heart of faith, we have missed Christmas.

It is not good enough to have been close to him. It is useless to have laid eyes on him. We must also believe in him, we must build our future on him, as Simeon was prepared to do: "Lord, you may now set your servant free in peace, for my eyes have seen the salvation which you prepared." Having seen

and recognized the Christ Simeon knew that there was nothing else to do. Seeing the salvation which God prepared, believing that it was for him, was sufficient. Upon this recognition and in this faith Simeon was prepared to die.

This is the salvation which God has for us: God sends the Son into the world and shows him to us. God has people tell of the Christ. God wants us to take him into our arms and praise God for his coming. This is all that is needed: to see, accept and believe in the Savior, then we can die in the certainty of reaching our eternal home.

Did you have a good Christmas this year? You did, if you can speak with Simeon and say: I have now seen all I need for my salvation. I could receive nothing greater. I am prepared to return to God, for God himself has made the road on which I can return to God.

I must say, that for the first time in many years, I have had such a Christmas. I did not lie when I said to the cashier in the hardware store that my Christmas had been just wonderful.

Until I return to God, I have a task to do: to speak of God's light to people, so that they will hear of God's love, believe in Christ and receive the salvation which God wants them to have. This is the task of all of us. May we do it with courage and zeal in the knowledge of having met God's salvation.

Notes

¹ Preached the First Sunday After Christmas, 1990.