Simeon
Luke 2:21-35

So, Christmas is over, and 2018 is coming to an end, and so I want us to look at a man in the Bible called Simeon. And if you don't know who Simeon was, by the time we get to meet him he was already an old man. And as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple, forty days after his birth, to dedicate him, it was Simeon who met them.

And I want us to look at this man for a number of reasons. Firstly, chronologically - because after Jesus' birth, this meeting with Simeon is what comes next in the Bible. But secondly, we're coming to the end of another year, and Simeon's a man approaching the end of his life. But just like we've got a new year ahead of us, Simeon's also standing on the threshold of something new. And as he enters what's probably the final straight of his life, he's a man who's managing to finish with a sense of joy and fulfilment and completion - and yet full of expectation. And I suspect that's what we all want for the coming year and beyond: a joy that rises above our circumstances; a sense of living on target, of being in the groove; and that sense of fulfilment of life well lived mixed with serious hope and expectancy for the future. So we're going to see what Simeon has to teach us.

Reading: Luke 2:21-35

Life is Not About You
Look at v25, where Luke tells us that Simeon was 'waiting for the consolation of Israel.' In other words, here's a man who looks out on the state of his world, of his people, and he longs for things to be better. He wants things to be different. He wants Israel to be restored and revived and rescued. And, in one way or another, I reckon most of us want that. And I don't necessarily mean geo-politically, but in terms of our personal worlds, and our relationships, and the circle of our family and friends, and our inner lives, I suspect we all want things to change for the better. The question is, how?

I was talking to a friend recently, who had just turned 60. And he said that he increasingly realised that the path to maturity comes with the understanding that 'life's not about you.' That the way to peace and contentment is to realise, you're not the centre. But to think like that, especially in our current culture, is to be like a soldier marching out of step with his platoon, isn't it? In fact, not just marching out of step, but marching in the opposite direction. Because we live in an era that's built off of the assumption that life <u>is</u> all about me.

But the problem is that such an outlook takes its toll, doesn't it? Because sooner or later, if you think life is about you, that idea will work its way out in your relationships. I mean, take mid-life crises for example. I suspect that at the root of many, if not every mid-life crisis, is this deep-seated desire for ME, and it's been bubbling away under ground for however long, kept down by religious or moral or family constraints, but then it suddenly bursts through the surface, and the person has a sexual affair, or leaves their family because they feel trapped, or spends way too much on some flash new car, or whatever, because, now, 'I want life to be different. I want life to be about me. I've spent enough time it being about others, I want some ME time, some ME years.'

But the Bible presents a very different vision and purpose for your life than *you*. Look at what the apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:16 'For by him [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible… all things were created through him *and for him*.' Now, in our crazy age, it might come as a shock to learn that you didn't create yourself, but you didn't. Christ did. And the fact that you didn't means that you can never determine the meaning of your life, for yourself. Because that would be like finding a new invention in the middle of the road and deciding, 'this is for opening tin cans.' When, if you

asked the designer he'd tell you it was for digging holes in the road. And only your creator can tell you why he made you. And the Bible tells us that you weren't made for yourself, you were made by God, for God. And thinking that life is about you, and you were made for yourself, would be like going to watch a football match and when all those other 60,000 people sat around you leap from their seats and start cheering, you think it's for you, because you shifted in your seat or something, when in fact it's for the guy on the pitch who just scored a goal! And just so the purpose and the joy and applause of life, is not about you. It's about Another.

Now, it didn't take my friend his whole 60 years to understand that, but still, it can take us time, can't it? And whilst we don't know anything about Simeon outside of this episode, what we do know is that at the end of his life, he got this.

You see, Simeon enters the temple and sees Mary and Joseph; he takes Jesus in his arms, and he says, v29, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation." He sounds like a man who's achieved his life's goal, doesn't he? And yet, there is zero self-absorption. He's fulfilled his life's ambition, he's attained his life objective - and it's not about him at all. It's all about this Messiah he holds in his arms.

Not long after we moved to Switzerland, we decided to go cross-country skiing with the kids, who were much younger than now. And we hired the skis and poles and we went up into the Jura, and thought - 'pah, this is going to be so easy, what can be so hard about cross-country skiing?' Until we got to our first downhill bit, and you realise the impossibility of trying to turn or brake whilst balanced on two matchsticks on ice. But the falls weren't the worst thing. We started out from a place called St George, and we did this big circuit, following the signs for this loop, and as it went on and on the kids were getting more and more fed up, so we kept on encouraging them 'look, the sign says, La St George is only a kilometre away, we're so nearly there, keep going!' Until we arrived at La St George, and discovered that La St George and St George are two entirely different places, and we still had kilometres to go back to the car.

And to live for a purpose in life other than the one you were created for is like spending your life heading for La St George, only to discover you're in the wrong place. But Simeon didn't. He understood that he had been made for Another, and that his life's purpose was to see and welcome Christ; that his life's meaning was to live for Another. And so is ours.

And yet, one of the extraordinary things about Simeon is that his sense of purpose was much bigger than 'Christ coming for Simeon and he, Simeon, having a place in this great drama'. Because, you can have a vision for God and serving God, and it still be all about you, can't you? But look at v30-31: "for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence *of all peoples*." You see, Simeon knows that what God is doing in Christ is way bigger than just his little life. So his world-view isn't constrained by the borders of his own life, it opens up into this whole-world vision of what God is up to. And to think that life is about me, is just a way too small way of looking at life. Life and purpose and meaning is way more expansive than 'me'. And to think otherwise, is to live life like someone who has picked up a pair of binoculars - but who insists on looking through them the wrong way, and instead of your vision of life making everything bigger, it shrinks your world.

You see, life is not ultimately about your personal fulfilment - and yet Simeon goes away fulfilled. It's not about us achieving our ambitions - yet Simeon goes away having achieved

his crowning ambition. It's not even about our personal happiness - and yet Simeon's joy still seeps through the lines of his story, 2000 years later. Life is about Christ, that we were made by him, and for him, to live for his glory, and not for ourselves. And it's as we understand that, that we'll enjoy the sense of fulfilment, of ambitions achieved, and inner satisfaction and peace and joy Simeon knew.

The question is though, how did he get there?

The Influences that Shape You

Look at v25, 'The Holy Spirit was upon him.' And v26, 'And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit.' And v27, 'And he came in the Spirit into the temple.' So here is a man who is filled with the Spirit, taught by the Spirit and led by the Spirit. And the truth is, all of us are filled, and taught and led by one spirit or another, aren't we? And that could be the spirit of the age, of our secular culture, and you're shaped and molded, and make your decisions, and frame your life's priorities, according to the culture of the moment. Or, for you it might be more of a traditional or religious spirit. You like the old fashioned certainties, the moral uprightness of doing the right thing, of duty, and it's those things that pervade your life and guide your steps.

But for Simeon, the wind in his sails, and the controlling principle in his life, was the Spirit of God. And Luke tells us that the Spirit was on him and that Simeon was sensitive to him: that when the Spirit revealed things to him, he listened. Why? Because his heart was soft enough to be taught, and his will malleable enough to be bent, and his hand open enough to be held and led. And yet, he was old!

And the danger as you get older is that you just become more grumpy. You get more stubborn, more fixed in your ways. You don't want others telling you what to do - because life's about you, after all, so you should be the one giving the orders! And yet Simeon's a man led by the Spirit. And he wasn't just sensitive to the Spirit, he was responsive to him. And if we're to live for a purpose higher than ourselves, then like Simeon we need a power from outside ourselves to do it.

And the same heart-softening, will-moulding influence of the Holy Spirit that kept Simeon from the me-centred sins of age, can keep us from the me-centred temptations of the year ahead.

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body' (v19-20). In other words, Paul is saying that when you become a Christian, the way you life your life radically changes, because Christ has taken ownership of you, and so you're no longer your own. So, instead of living for your own pleasure and glory, you're going to live for his glory. And you can do that, Paul says, because your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now that can sound weird and new-agey, can't it? 'My body is a temple!' But that's not how Paul means it. The Old Testament describes God coming and filling the temple in Jerusalem and investing everything about it with this sense of holiness, of everything about the temple being given over to God. So, when Paul talks of you being a temple of the Spirit, who lives in you, he means that God isn't like an infrequent visitor in your life, like a friend who comes and stays with you a couple of times a year, when you're feeling a bit more 'spiritual'. He means that, by his Spirit, God is a permanent resident in your life; that he's the controlling influence, the presence that invests everything about your life with

meaning. It's why Paul says in Galatians 5 that if we 'walk by the Spirit… you will not gratify the desires of the flesh' (v16) - you won't live to please yourself. It's why he goes on to say that we can be 'led by the Spirit' (v18) and 'live by the Spirit' and 'keep in step with the Spirit' (v25). In other words, Simeon's experience of being filled and taught and led by the Spirit aren't just for a special, saintly elite. It's the normal Christian life.

And yet, it wasn't just God's Spirit who was shaping Simeon, was it? It was also God's word. Now, at the moment, two of our girls are into audio books, and they go round with their headphones in listening to some Jane Austin novel or other. And occasionally, they'll start laughing to themselves - and Su and I look at them and go, 'what's got into them?!' But, of course, what's got into them is the story they're listening to, that we're not hearing.

And the reason Simeon knew a joy and a happiness that could escape the gravitational pull of his ego, the reason he wasn't trapped in a me-centred orbit of life, was because he was listening to a very different story. He was a man moving in the Spirit, but fed by and listening to the word.

Look at v26 again, 'It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' So how had the Spirit revealed that to him? Did the Spirit speak to him, out of the blue and tell him, 'God is going to send a messiah, and you're going to live to see it.' I don't think so. Look at v32. Simeon is looking down at this baby he's holding in his arms and describes him as God's salvation, 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.'

So he's saying that for Gentiles, for non-Jewish people, Jesus is a light for revelation, but for Jewish people he's a light for glory. Why the difference? Because the Jewish people have already had the revelation of the Messiah's coming for hundreds of years, through the prophets, in the Old Testament. And that's where Simeon has got his knowledge about the Messiah from. He's been reading and studying the Scriptures, and as he's done that the Spirit has spoken to him and told him, 'Simeon, you're going to see this. All these passages about the Messiah that you're reading, all this hope that's building inside you, you're going to see it.' And as he holds Jesus, he knows that this baby is the fulfilment of all the promises he's read about.

And what's extraordinary about Simeon is that, as he's read, he's been more shaped by the Spirit and what the word of God actually says, than by his surrounding culture. You see, everyone else would have had tunnel vision when it came to the Messiah - he was going to be a political leader, for the Jews and against the oppressive gentiles. But Simeon hasn't been blinded by his culture. He's let all those passages that speak of Christ's world-wide rule, and of him being a blessing to the nations and a light to the gentiles, speak for themselves. And so he knows that when he holds Jesus he's holding not just the saviour of the Jews but of the world.

But it can be so tempting to do otherwise, can't it? You read what the Bible says, and you hear what our culture says, or your friends say, and you think, God can't mean that, or if he does, these other voices must be right and God wrong. And culture and society and what your friends think trumps God's word.

Well, Psalm 1 opens the Book of Psalms by saying, 'Blessed is the man…' *happy* is the man, or the woman, whose 'delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.' And Simeon knew the happiness of someone delighting in God's word that

means you live for a much greater vision than yourself - one molded and shaped by the Spirit and the word.

And as we start another year, each of us can experience that same peace and joy and sense of fulfilment, as we keep coming back to God to be filled with his Spirit, and allow his word to dwell in us richly.

But thirdly, one last thing we can learn from Simeon:

The One who Lifts You Up (Has Come)
Look what Simeon says to Mary in v34, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed."

Now, there can be a temptation to think that everyone loves Jesus, especially at Christmas, because who couldn't love a little baby in a manger? It's just the church, or Christians, or organised religion that people don't like. But that depends on which Jesus you're talking about, doesn't it? Because, there's the Jesus who agrees with whatever you believe, the Jesus who's an extension of our imaginations, *or* there's the Jesus of the Bible. And tragically, from the beginning, Simeon recognised that that Jesus would be hugely controversial, precisely because he would challenge the basis on which we live, and because, ultimately, he hadn't come as sort of heavenly life coach, to help us find our spiritual side and give us the occasional pep-talk, but as the king who commands our allegiance. And because of that Simeon knew that some people would oppose Jesus, and that that would have consequences.

Now, you know what it's like when you're in the mountains, and you take a path that's a bit rocky, and you're not really looking where you're going, and suddenly you stumble, because there's this rock in the path you've not seen, and you catch your foot on it. And right at the start, Simeon recognised that for people who want to pursue their own paths, Jesus was going to be like a stone in their way, that trips them up.

But not for everyone. For others, Simeon says, Jesus is appointed for their rising - for picking them up again, for setting them on their feet and putting them on the right path. But for that to happen, then just like Simeon, we've got to recognise who Jesus is, and find our life and our purpose in him, rather than in the headlong pursuit of our own.

The question is, though, why would you ever want to do that? I mean, maybe you're already a Christian, and you feel like your faith is tiring, and the idea of some 'me' years, and putting yourself at the centre for a bit frankly sounds great. Or maybe you're not yet a Christian, and living for 'me' is how you've been living for years and you question why you should change. So why make the coming year one of finding your joy and fulfilment in Christ?

Well, go back to the start of this story. Mary and Joseph come to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice for her purification and to present Jesus to the Lord. And for their offering, the Old Testament law said they were to bring a year old lamb, plus a pigeon or a turtledove, but if they couldn't afford a lamb, they could bring two turtledoves or two pigeons. What do Mary and Joseph bring? Verse 24, 'A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." They bring the offering of the poor.

Do you see how remarkable that is? The Son of God has been born into the world. The king who demands our allegiance has come. The fulfilment of all God's promises has

arrived. God has returned to his temple. And he's poor. His folks can't afford the sacrifice. He's come to the bottom, not the top. Why? 2 Cor 8: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'

And Christ humbled himself in his birth, and much more so in his death, Simeon says, to lift you up. And if, here, Simeon goes away fulfilled, at the cross, the Lord Jesus cried out, 'it is finished!' as he paid the price for your sins. And he made your welfare his purpose. He made your hope his object, and the forgiveness of your sins his intention. And as you grasps the height and length and breadth and depth of his life laying down love for, you'll know why he's the one you should trust and love and live for. And as you do, you'll know something of Simeon's peace and joy and fulfilment.