

**Malachi 3:1-5 and Luke 2:22-40
(2-2-14)**

Malachi asked '...who can stand when he appears?'

Luke has Simeon, holding a one-week-old bundle of vulnerability, saying that the child is destined to cause 'the falling and rising of many in Israel'.

Salvation has arrived at the Temple in the form of a helpless baby. Simeon and Anna represent the Israel that had been on tiptoe longing for the coming of the Messiah. But who would have expected that he would arrive in the arms of a young peasant couple?

Who would fall and who would rise? Luke has already said that the coming of the Messiah would bring down the mighty and lift up the humble.

And we can see this in who it is who is recognizing who Jesus really is. Jesus looked like a normal child but these two elderly and very Godly people in the Temple were able to see that this baby brought in for a dedication was a very special child.

Simeon says that now he has seen this very special baby he knows he can die in peace because he sees that it is through this child that God will save His people. (Nunc Dimittis)

He sees that in future people will be put right with God through Jesus. Under the Old Covenant a visit to the Temple in Jerusalem was required to offer God an animal sacrifice. That is no longer going to be necessary, God is going to do a new thing. In future the way to God will be through Jesus.

This is a real turning point. Simeon seeing that animals being offered for sacrifice for the sins of

the Jewish people will become Jesus' one off sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

The judgment of his coming, as announced in the Malachi passage, is a step towards establishing true worship in the Temple. Hence images of refiner's fire, and launderer's soap. Neither of actions denote final destruction, but a harsh cleansing. Jesus' death, will be followed by renewal, Jesus' resurrection.

Ultimately it was to be Jesus himself who would both fall and rise. No wonder it would be a soul-piercing experience for his mother.

No-one else bustling around in the Temple saw this amazing revelation. Why did they? An important question for us if we want to see God's salvation! Simeon and Anna's wisdom didn't come just from their ripeness of years. It came from their dedication and devotion of waiting faithfully and patiently upon God. This had produced a different type of ripeness in their lives. The ripeness of fruit, fruit of the Holy Spirit. The reason they see what everyone else doesn't is due to the Holy Spirit being at work. Luke makes this abundantly clear, telling us three times that Simeon, recognises Jesus because of the Holy Spirit's work, The people bustling about the temple wouldn't have noticed this little group of people. And after the ceremony, however wonderful the splendour of temple and revelation that Jesus is the light for the world Mary & Joseph simply returned home! (like the shepherds had or the disciples would after the transfiguration, the resurrection and ascension).

This incident is the closure of the Christmas story, the baby was promised, the baby was born and the good news was declared to shepherds.

As we have put the figures away are we going to go home and just forget it?

According to Simeon we shouldn't. Simeon says what matters is how people respond to Jesus Christ.

Simeon says the good news will reach out to all peoples. This baby was born for salvation. This baby was born for revelation. Now we must choose what we think.

He says to Mary, 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too'

How we react to Jesus reveals how our heart responds to God.

Sadly many people ignore Jesus, which is the same as ignoring God. Occasionally turning to Jesus when in trouble, but once the crisis has gone it is back to living as if there is no God

Some people don't ignore Jesus. They hate Him and what He stands for. The Jewish leaders hated Jesus because He challenged their authority, status and tradition. Some people hate Jesus because He stands for all that's weak, vulnerable and feeble. He deserved to die. Today many hate Jesus because they see Him as anti-libertarian, ironically an accusation for the one who was born to set us free. But popular belief says that to be free is to do what you want and become your own God. Jesus says that to be free is to live by love and obedience to Him and to God, to live as we were made to live, which means that not everything we want to do IS okay.

Simeon's warning to Mary – and to all who follow Jesus is don't be surprised if people ignore Jesus, regularly use his name as a swear word or even if they hate him.

To be honest there's usually more hope for those who hate Jesus. They are at least thinking in about Him and taking him seriously and when they discover Him they really know it.

The worst thing is those who think they know Him and don't. This might be because they know ABOUT Him, i.e. in a factual way. Or it might be because we live in a society which in the past has been saturated in Christian thinking, perhaps even cherished many of the Christian virtues.

But it is so easy for these ideas to blind us to the things of God. How ever can we come to see? To really know Him?

Jesus will open our eyes by sending the Spirit. We saw a couple of weeks ago how John says of Jesus, 'He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit'. And it really is the Spirit of God who opens our eyes.

Jesus has told us: If we really want to see – we need to mean to do business with God. 'Ask, seek, knock'.

This means really doing those things. Asking. Ask me when you don't understand something in a service. Go to a Home Group to help you study God's word. Get down on your knees and ask Him.

The very fact that you are beginning to hunger to find out more about God and His ways means that the Holy Spirit is at work in you.

Because of the Spirit, because of Jesus, we begin to see the ways of God. This isn't something that can be taught, it's a gift. We begin to see God. Like Anna and Simeon, we begin to see how He has been at work in history. The Jewish scriptures come alive to us; Jesus shows us how to understand them and how we are to live them. And as we seek Him and grow closer to Him, so we're taken deeper into Him.

In the course of His earthly ministry Jesus brought sight to the blind and in so doing describes himself as 'the light of the world.' At his death, darkness covered the earth, but His resurrection came with the new light of dawn.

For Simeon and Anna standing in the Temple that day, steeped in old tradition they suddenly saw this light of God's new way of salvation.

They had both been very patient but are now able to respond in an extraordinary way to this baby who comes with his parents into the Temple. Simeon sings the Nunc Dimittis and Anna gets all excited and tells everybody about the child who will save Israel.

They are welcoming in the new age. They are in the Temple, the place where sins can be forgiven through sacrifice, the place of healing, the place where humankind can meet with God, the most holy of places. But this child that excites them is going to make claims about being the Temple. He will become the sacrifice that forgives our sins. He will heal people and be the person in whom we encounter God. He is going to change everything. He will bring the light to all the nations, not just to Israel. He will challenge politics and religion. He will challenge everyone and every institution that is not doing things God's way.

Today we stand here as they stood, largely unnoticed by world around them. But we have the light of the world in us to take home and then to share - the light of world when our Christmas candles are extinguished can burn on in our hearts as our future hope.