

## The Nunc Dimittis and preparing for death

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Luke 2.25-38

Last term I reflected on the first of the gospel canticles we sing at Evensong, the Magnificat, and spoke of the role of women in scripture. Tonight is the turn of the Nunc Dimittis, but this is much more of a personal sermon. I developed a slipped disc just two days before Christmas (you can ask Bridget how convenient that was and is) and I am now on a journey of recovery. Yet a period of poor health prompts me to be rather soulful.

The Nunc Dimittis has been part of my life since I came up to Cambridge in 1972 and started to attend chapel evensong. The canticle subsequently became something quite core to my spirituality in this way. About thirty five years ago I was sent to A&E by my GP with a note for the triage nurse. He thought I had a deep vein thrombosis in my leg. I had been rather blasé about my swollen leg until the hospital doctor encouragingly said, “Let’s hope it doesn’t move to your lungs; that would be a mess.” As I half slept that night, thinking it might be my last, I kept reciting from memory the Nunc Dimittis:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; according to thy word;

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation; which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles; and the glory of thy people Israel.

It is the core prayer of preparation for my death. As part of Compline, I use it nearly every night as, in the darkness, I entrust myself to the mystery that is sleep.

It doesn't bother me that it is improbable that anything much in Luke's birth narratives of Jesus actually happened. Rather, like Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy, its truth lies in a more profound sphere than historicity. All three are partly about the nurture of parenting, though the birth narratives are more complex and hold a clearer view that our own natural parents point towards a more fundamental parenting provided by the universe, and further that the existence of the universe's own nature and nurture lie deeper still, in Being itself, the fundamental transcendental. And yet, in all three stories, these fundamentals are revealed in the birth of each human life. For this reason, I think, most people who are not religious are very happy to celebrate the Christian festival just as they maintain the talk of Father Christmas. In doing this, they set to one side Luke's difficult, but clear, claim that universal parental relationships are revealed uniquely in the life and death of a particular historical individual person, Jesus of Nazareth. I am glad that people can and do set this aside, seeing that it is a step people can make fairly easily in today's world, increasingly secular that it is.

As an amusing aside on this, also about thirty five years ago, Bridget was shopping in Chelmsford in Essex in the run-up to Christmas. The old-fashioned department store had as the centre of its window display a traditional nativity scene. Bridget overheard two young women as they passed it saying, “Huh! Typical! The Church gets into everything these days!”

At this stage of Luke’s birth narrative we are introduced to two characters, both of whom are acutely aware of the tragedy of life and of the world. This was focussed for them (and Luke’s first readers) in the plight of the Jews under a succession of empires, with all the reverberating hate and selfishness in individual lives and relationships this brings. However, Simeon and Anna both hope for something much better, for *consolation* and for *redemption*. And they recognise these as latent in this baby before them. Any baby, in its potential and vibrant life, signals hope and love. In Luke’s retrospect, though, this one baby is the type of all the others because of his subsequent life-story: his death in certain circumstances that give it meaning and traction (Simeon’s prophecy alludes to this in the fall and rising of many and in the pierced heart of Mary) and the subsequent experiences that his followers identified as resurrection. Thus it comes about that these two hopeful people can become the story of Everywoman or Everyman.

In the words of the New English Bible’s Beatitudes, those of us who hunger and thirst to see right prevail – and is there anyone does not desire this at root, even if this has to varying

degrees become perverted into right for me to prevail over the rights of others? – We who hunger and thirst for right to prevail, we are on the right track. Almost by definition, seeking what is right is itself right. Do not give up. Do not give up the struggle. Do not give in to despair. Do not lose hope. In your life-practice or spiritual practice work to deepen your desire for right to prevail, whether on the global scale or at the personal in the crises of our lives. For those, like me, of a gloomy disposition, contest the temptation to despair. We can remember the opening challenge of Compline, quoting I Peter 5.8-9, “Be sober, be vigilant; resist the devil, steadfast in the faith.” So, do not despair; deepen your desire instead.

Neither should one (and I am speaking severely to myself at this point), neither should one keep leaping to the thought, “The End is nigh!” Being prepared for death, the daily commending of our spirits into the hands of the Lord God of truth, is not at all the same thing as writing off all the years between now and then. Though very alert to the saying that Man proposes, God disposes, rather than peppering my planning with ‘God willing’ I prefer to say, “If I’m spared.” (I fancy this is a Scotticism, but I’m no sure.) ‘If I’m spared’ conjures up in my mind a parish harvest supper. There is a busy team in the kitchen washing up; can they spare me, the vicar? If they can, I can keep working the tables, talking to everyone who has come. So, I picture the heavenly team busy at whatever they get up to up there, a harp orchestra, I suppose. For now at least they can manage without me. I’m spared, and so remain in this life – and remain for a purpose.

Into thy hands I commend my spirit *in the present* to be a servant of God, obeying orders, and getting on with life. This is not a fatalism but an openness to activism. What am I being called to do in the present moment to bring consolation and redemption? How can I help right prevail?

There is another spiritual practice that the Nunc Dimittis enjoins. As I say, “For mine eyes have seen thy salvation” I am challenged to notice the signs of salvation. Challenged to count my blessings, giving thanks at all times and in all places. Challenged to raise my eyes from my difficulties so that the moments of salvation around me can impinge on my awareness.

Let me illustrate with one occasion that made a lasting impression on me. I was walking in the campus of ARU, close by some steps, when a mother and two children came by to go up them. The girl was about four, her brother had not long learned to walk. He literally had to climb the steps, hand over hand. He was immersed in the challenge and chuckled the whole time. His sister responded, “Yes, I know, this is fun,” though she could walk up them normally. This incident was a shaft of light for me in the depressed mood I was in at the time. I often remember it.

Most days do not come with such powerful moments. We are to look out for the small things or for the ongoing things that are often very important, such as the love of family and friends, or being surrounded by nature, or for food, both good and indifferent. And there are always memories of the

past for which we can be thankful. I am pretty rubbish in practice at all this. Sometimes nothing comes to mind and then I think to myself, “Well, I have just failed to notice the blessings that have come my way,” and move on.

In extremis we may need a different tactic. I remember reading about one rabbi some centuries ago. His prayer: “I thank you, Lord, now for what may befall me in the future, because at that time I may not be able to thank you.” As well as such cautious thanks offered in prospect, if we have survived such dark moments, perhaps we may be thankful in retrospect. From a Christian perspective, one might consider such dark moments as times when we are dying with Christ, just as we shall (and even now in small ways do) share in the resurrection of Christ. Is it too embarrassingly naff to point out that however black the clouds are overhead, the sun is still shining above them? Clouds clear.

Whatever our faith or belief, it is a good mental health practice to find things to be thankful for. One can do this daily, perhaps on getting into bed at the end of the day, or at random moments. But for now, I wonder if you would be willing to join me quietly over the next two minutes to call to mind some of the things you can be thankful for?

*Silence*

Thank you.

P.S. It turned out that I didn't have deep vein thrombosis. Something else for me to be thankful for.