

December 28, 2014 Simeon Homily

Some years ago the Nobel Prize winning author , Elie Wiesel, wrote a highly acclaimed book on the Hasidic Jewish Masters, entitled "Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters".

Himself a devout Jew, Wiesel writes sympathetically of some of the most revered Hasidic Rabbis of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. The Hasidic Masters had one thing in common. Each one lived wholly in the expectation of the Messiah's coming. One such Rabbi was Moshe of Ujhely. He waited his whole life for the Messiah and never went to bed without reminding his sons; "If he comes, wake me right away".

Near the end of his life, this is how he spoke to God: "Master of the Universe, my strength is gone I am exhausted. You must send us the Messiah. You have no choice. I'm asking this for my own salvation. If you wish, I am willing to deny myself even a single ray of light and joy. Believe me, I am ready to sacrifice my life and my soul and undergo the terrors of eternal night if that be the price of Israel's redemption. I know, Master of the Universe that I am the last of the last but I love truth and I say: If I had known that my hair would turn white without my eyes beholding the savior, I could have gone on living." Sadly, he died without having seen the Messiah.

Rabbi Moshe's prayer makes our Gospel reading all the more remarkable. A righteous and pious old Jew, Simeon, receives an extraordinary promise... to see the Messiah before his death (Lk.2:26). The eyes of this old man perceive the extraordinary character of an otherwise ordinary event in the Jerusalem Temple (the circumcision of the infant Christ on the eighth day following his birth.) He takes the child in his arms and at that precise moment he praises God for keeping His Word and for being true to His promise (Lk2:29). Simeon boldly proclaims Jesus to the glory of his people, Israel (Lk2:32). The last words of a holy, dying prophet must move us to the depths of our souls.

This particular event in the life of the Holy Family and their unexpected encounter with the aged Simeon has sentimental importance for me personally. For many years I've spent my annual retreat at St. Joseph's Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts. Until very recently, I had an opportunity to see an elderly monk, Raphael Simon, who was a Jewish convert to the Christian faith early in his adult life. A trained psychiatrist, he later wrote an apologia for his conversion. He borrowed the title of his book from the words of Simeon: "The Glory of my People". The elderly monk fascinated me! The book is still in print. Whenever I hear the unforgettable words of the devout Jew, Simeon, I am reminded of another elderly Jew who recognized the Messiah.

In addition, the Cantic of Simeon (Lk.29-32) has been recited as the night prayer of the Church since the Fifth Century. The monks and all those who profess to be Disciples of Jesus can rest easy because their eyes have seen the salvation which God has prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of the people of Israel. Consequently, The Christmas event is meant not only for the chosen people, the Jews, but for the whole world. Jesus is the Light that shines on all nations, all peoples!

Another lesson: Jesus is joy and light, but also sword and suffering. In forewarning Mary that a sword would one day pierce her heart, Simeon spoke the unvarnished truth to the mother of our Lord. And will that same sword pierce our hearts as well?

Amen.