

In his reflections on today's gospel reading (Lk. 2:22-40), St. Luke's account of the Presentation in the temple and one of the joyful mysteries, Father Mark Link, a Jesuit priest, makes reference to one of America's outstanding writers of the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is best remembered for his novel, "The Scarlet Letter". After Hawthorne's death, a draft of a play that he never had a chance to write was found on his writing desk. It centers around a mysterious person. The people of the village talked about the person. Everyone dreamed of the person. Everyone awaited the person's coming. Alas, the person never came. Fr. Link is of the view that the Old Testament is like that play. It centers around a person, the Messiah, for whom everyone was waiting to come and save Israel.

In his book "Souls on fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters", He writes of a learned nineteenth century rebbe, Moshe of Ujhely. A man of deep Jewish faith, he waited his whole life for the Messiah. He never went to bed without reminding his sons, "If he comes, wake me right away" At the end of his life he voiced his disappointment to God in a heartfelt prayer:

"Master of the universe, my strength is gone; I am exhausted. You must send us the Messiah. You have no choice. Don't think I am asking this for my own salvation. If you wish I am willing to deny myself 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 ever beholding the Savior, I could not have gone on living. You held me, you kept me going with hope, with faith. Is it really so clever, so charitable, to mock an old man like me? I ask you!"

In today's gospel, Simeon, a righteous and devout Jew devoted to prayer, personifies ancient Israel. He was part of a group known as the "quiet ones". In solitude they sought in prayer the hope of salvation for the Chosen People. No fewer than three times do we, the readers of this sacred text, learn that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon and that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Messiah. And in a gesture immortalized by the Dutch master, Rembrandt, Simeon is depicted holding the six week old child in his arms as he praises God for keeping his promise. In the painting a light shines on Simeon and the Holy Family. Outside their small circle there is only darkness.

Simeon's beautiful canticle (or song) of praise, the "nunc dimittis", is part of the night prayer of the church. In addition, it is used also to prepare for the hour of his death. The words are comforting:

"Now Master, you may let your servant go

In peace, according to your word,

For my eyes have seen your salvation,

Which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel".

Blessed are the eyes of Simeon who beheld the long awaited Messiah.

The joyful mystery of the Presentation is all too familiar to most of us. What is concerning is that too many of us have lost just how momentous, how wonderful and grace-filled was this extraordinary event and why it is such an illuminating chapter in Luke's infancy narrative. Recall from the gospel the words, "The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him" (Lk. 2:33).

The Messiah has appeared.

The Holy Family is amazed.

Are we?