

Playing second fiddle

Some of the most underrated lyrics for a song appear in the second chapter of the gospel according to St Luke. All good lyrics need a good tune if the song is going to be a 'hit', and Luke 2: 29 – 35 has never become a liturgical chart-topper. In fact it can be regarded as a bit of a liturgical 'B side' – if you are old enough to remember such things.

Luke 2 contains the Song of Simeon, whose impact is almost lost under the familiar birth narrative. Chapter 2 starts with the words, known to millions through numerous carol services, 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled'. The reader has a feeling of the awesome might and majesty of the Roman Empire, particularly the phrase 'all the world'.

The events of the early years of Jesus' life are told very quickly – moving swiftly from the birth to the circumcision and on to the purification. Luke, who was writing for non-Jewish Christians, explains the ceremony to his readers. In his gospel Luke places a special emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit; and old Simeon (tradition always presents him as an old man) is no exception, with three mentions of the Holy Spirit acting upon him in three consecutive verses (25 – 27). So clearly Luke is placing a special emphasis on the events which are about to take place. Simeon's words and actions are very significant as he is the first person to express faith in Jesus as Saviour, Christ and universal Lord - the simple shepherds had to have this revealed to them by angels. The story has moved from the realms of angels and a virgin mother proclaiming Jesus as saviour, to a 'normal' human being giving voice to the fact that Jesus is special.

Verses 29 – 32 are more generally known as the 'Nunc Dimittis' so called from the first words of the Latin translation. Interestingly there is no mention of Simeon's age in the text; although he was 'righteous and devout' there is no reason to assume that he was an old man. The phrase 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace' is taken from the manumission of a slave, with Simeon expressing the hope of freedom for all that the birth of Jesus brings. The idea of the servant (or more accurately a slave) departing in peace could be a metaphor for the end of the old order and the ushering in of a new age. The 'in peace' that Simeon refers to is the idea of a state of peace with God. Simeon is not so much referring to a 'peaceful' death, but the gift of freedom and liberation. This peace is not just for Israel, God's chosen people, but also for Gentiles – Luke's own audience. Luke uses the traditional Jewish ceremony of Purification to proclaim, early on in his gospel, the universal nature of Jesus' message.

Immediately following on from Simeon's message of liberation we have mention of Anna, the first mention of a female in Luke's Gospel who is not a relative of Jesus. Anna is a prophetess 'of a great age'. The fact that Anna's great age is mentioned and Simeon's is not adds some credibility to the view that he might not have been an old man. Significantly it is Anna who becomes the first, and the first female, evangelist; Luke tells how she 'she spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel'.

Evensong is where we usually encounter the Nunc Dimittis. The Book of Common Prayer makes provision for alternative canticles – Cantate Domino (Psalm 98) and Deus Misereatur (Psalm 67), but these are rarely used.

When producing the Book of Common Prayer Thomas Cramner combined the Offices of Vespers and Compline to produce the unique Anglican Office of Evensong. The Magnificat is the canticle taken from Vespers and the Nunc Dimittis being the canticle taken from Compline. It is within the context of Evensong that the Nunc Dimittis seems to play second fiddle to the Magnificat. The Magnificat comes from Luke 1: 46 – 55 with its triumphant opening; Mary’s song declaring the greatness of the Lord, seems to put the opening poor old Simeon’s song into the shade. Within the context of Choral Evensong this seems to happen musically, with many glorious settings of the Magnificat, whilst the music for the Nunc Dimittis seeming to be a bit of an after thought. Music for the Magnificat often seems to capture the dramatic sense of the words – even in settings prepared for the concert hall. But the poor old Nunc Dimittis never seems to have the same impact, and the words are rarely, if ever, heard in the context of a composition for concert performance. One setting of the Nunc Dimittis I feel works supremely well is the *Collegium Regale* by Herbert Howells, paradoxically not one of my favourite composers. He explained that in his *Collegium Regale* setting of the Magnificat ‘... the mighty should be put down from their seat without brute force that would deny the canticle’s feminine association. Equally, that in the Nunc Dimittis, the tenor’s domination should characterise the gentle Simeon. Only the Gloria should raise its voice’.

In many ways Cranmer’s craftsman-like sandwiching of Vespers and Evensong does the Song of Simeon a disservice - with the Nunc Dimittis playing second fiddle to the Magnificat. However, hearing the words late at night in the Office of Compline, when they are not overshadowed by Mary’s Song, they make more of an impact; particularly when preceded and followed by the antiphon ‘Save us, O Lord, while waking, and guard us while sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep may rest in peace’. In Compline the context of Simeon’s universal message is set within the context of our own spiritual journey as we reflect on our thoughts and actions of the day. The musical setting by Gustav Holst of the Latin text, written to be performed by the choir of Westminster Cathedral in the context of Vespers, is sublime.

As we keep the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Candlemas) let us remember the radical nature of Luke Chapter 2. After playing second fiddle to the birth narrative we have a powerful song of liberation, not death, and the first significant role for a woman following the Incarnation. In the liturgy of Candlemas the Nunc Dimittis doesn’t, for once, need to take second place to the Magnificat, and this Feast gives us a chance to focus on the liberating nature of Jesus’ message as we sing of the light of revelation to all peoples.