

The Mystery of Remembering

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.”

I have been doing a little reading recently about the beginnings of Radio in America and Great Britain. Frankly, I had no idea that so much has been written about the subject, nor did I have any idea that the subject could be so absorbing and interesting. I found out, for example, that Union College tied with a Pittsburgh radio station as the first Broadcast station in the USA. But also, when I started browsing some of the books about the early days of British Radio I was surprised by how my memories started returning to a past that was long gone. All sorts of things started crowding into my mind from long ago. The first time I heard an American program on the radio was during the Second World War when they started broadcasting the Jack Benny Show and the Bob Hope Show over the British Broadcasting Corporation. Going back even further than that, I remembered getting up at two o'clock in the morning to hear a boxing commentary of a fight between Tommy Farr, a British Champion heavyweight, who came from my home town, and the Brown Bomber, Joe Louis. Tommy Farr went the whole way and Joe Louis won on points. Though we thought that Tommy had most certainly won!!

But what came back most clearly were memories in which radio only played an incidental part. There was a program on every Saturday night called “In Town Tonight,” in which famous people who happened to be in London were interviewed. The program started with the sound of London traffic and the music of “The Knightsbridge March”, and a voice which suddenly shouted STOP, and then the sound of the traffic and the music stopped and the program began. I remember nothing about the program except that lead in, but still today the sound of the Knightsbridge March brings back to my mind the ritual of my family on Saturday night. I can still sense the quiet that came on a late Saturday afternoon before Father, Mother and I would go out for our shopping expedition down the Main Street of our town.

In fact, thinking about the radio started my thought processes off in a direction that quite unexpected. For what was apparent was that thoughts of certain radio programs started to bring back memories of family life, things we did together, and things we listened to together, those moments when the forces of history came into the quiet and safe confines of the home. The day that Neville Chamberlain announced that War had been declared – that brought back into memory a marvelous Sunday morning, coming home from Morning Service. For you the memories would be of the Day of Infamy, and F.D.R.'s speech announcing War with Japan. When in Britain a few years ago I bought some tapes of some of those early broadcast, and what was interesting to me was that the fact that the programs themselves did not arouse much in the way of enjoyment, but they did evoke memories, incidental to the broadcast.

What was interesting was that the memories were of things that had made my childhood what it was. I was led back into the things that played an important part in making me the person I am. In other words the memories that really counted were those that touched me at the core of my being. Promises made, promises kept, moments of bitter anguish, and moments of tremendous joy. They were Moments of quiet peace and moments of dark foreboding, moments of loss, and moments of near despair. They were moments of hard choices and moments of fateful decision. These were often caught through the sounds of past radio programs – for radio in those years just before WWII and during the War were integral to daily life and the memories touched the heart of one's being.

What has this to do with Simeon, this old man, who came to the ceremony of purification after Jesus' birth? Simeon must have looked back at his life and wondered at it all as he looked at this small infant before him. The old man and the new child. But Simeon's memories were not only of his life, they were also of his struggles with the truth of his faith. Before this child Jesus his memories of what he had believed of his nation's destiny and how that touched his life. Simeon had thought long and hard about the meaning of the religion he had believed from his own childhood, and now before this child something stirred within his mind just as snatches of radio programs had brought back not just memories of childhood, but moments of significance for a

future that was to be, so for Simeon it was snatches of the Scriptures that pulled from the past of the nation's memory a new pattern for the future.

The people who had worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, looked forward to a time when God would be more active for them again, when God would show his face once more to a people that had almost lost hope as it struggled under Roman domination.

There were those who looked to the past and saw only the hope of one who would come with force and power of sword. What could deliverance mean if it did not mean deliverance from the Roman forces of occupation? Or did the promises from the past mean that one was to come in a kind of earthly glory, bearing the gifts of earthly symbols of glory.

Simeon saw instead the power of a little child, the power of a promise that spoke to the deepest recesses of the human spirit that listened to the echoes of history. Simeon saw in the child in the temple that day a deliverance from a sickness far worse than a sickness of the body, he saw a rescue from dominance by a power far greater than the power of subservience to Roman might. He spoke of the deliverance of the soul from its own torment, the torment of bondage to its own desires, slavery to its own excesses of spirit.

The child before him, Simeon was aware, was no ordinary child, but one given in the moment of time when new things were about to happen in the world. For the meaning of the special nature of the baby he looked back to the old prophets of schooling days of his youth. There he read of the great figures of a decaying Israel who talked about the power of God to bring change and new life to His people. There he heard of the promises of the building of a new kingdom which would supersede the kingdom of Israel now lost and gone with the punishing force of armies far greater than the armies of poor Israel. Throughout his life Simeon had pondered the world that the prophets had described and the new order that they talked about. He must have pondered Amos' terrifying predictions of the destruction of the nation as a result of their denial of the kingship of god, their acceptance of other powers having equal power with God. But Simeon remembered the promise given through Amos that a remnant should be saved to carry on the worship of the god who was the Creator of all. Above all he remembered Isaiah who gave to his time a word of hope and comfort. The hope was contained in words telling of the coming of one who would take upon himself all the suffering of the people, and through that act of self-giving bring a new life and a new hope to all people:

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion, Thy God Reigneth!”

Above all he remembered Isaiah's promise from God that this dejected people would be the people from whom would spring the light of hope for all nations.

Now Simeon's mind resonated with all the thoughts that had been going through it all his life. The teachings of his youth had formed the basis for an expectation and a hope that would not be denied.

Hopes are strange things. We sometimes hope against hope when we are besieged by things that seem to be about to overcome us. But such a hope is very little more than a denial of the trouble that besets us and the very denial is the end of real hope. For true hope transcends the suffering, it does not deny it.

There is also the hope of youth. In Tennyson's words:

Hope! Thou nurse of young desire,

A day-dreaming

Hope against Hope.

This is the hope of a youth that the long life that starches ahead will bring great fulfillment and success. This is a hope that springs more from the imagination than from the understanding of how the world really is. Such hope is the expectation that things will ultimately work out well in the end. It is the hope of Voltaire's Pangloss, for whom nothing can possibly have a bad consequence and all things must work out for the good.

But Simeon had lived a long life, he could see beyond the dreary moments of time, see beyond the simple remedies of hopeful solutions. Nothing lasting could come from purely human intervention in the march of relentless time.

The hope that centered in this little defenseless child, this baby wrapped in the clothes of a carpenter's son, had to be a hope for God's coming into the realm of space and time to tell of the real nature of human suffering, the real nature of human rejection of the one who had given life and had given the possibility of truth and love.

In this child, Simeon saw the hopes and dreams of the prophets and the expectations of the people and so he could surrender himself into the hands of God, the god of his people, the God of his youth, the god of his long life. Simeon had lived a life of waiting and hoping. The moment of the presence of the hope of the years past had at last arrived. A new light had come into his life and the whole purpose of his living had been fulfilled in that moment in the presence of the Christ-child. What more could he ask out of life.

Simeon's prayer tells us much about this season when we have seen the culmination of the season of waiting which is Advent in the celebration of the birth of this special child. Simeon did not just stand around and wait for an end to come; his expectation was that there would be a moment in which he would encounter the real meaning of his hopes, the truth about his expectations and the fulfillment which had been embedded in his cultural memory. The amazing thing is that they came in the form of a defenseless child, an innocent child, a child who spoke no great truth, a child who had hunger pains just as we do, a child who had a runny nose like any other child whoever came into this world. But because he waited, Simeon did not wait in vain, for his waiting was filled with the thoughts of one who had pondered the secrets of his people, and the promises of God through his prophets.

What does Simeon, dear gentle Simeon, have to tell us at this time? It is surely this: we must listen for the signs of the times and the moments of discernment that might break through; we must be expectant of the breakthrough into our lives.

We might want God to appear to us right now, we might want God to deliver the goods to us this minute, and we might want God to dance a pretty dance at our calling. But that is not to understand the nature of God or the nature of our true needs.

We must wait for the presence of God in our lives, to be still and know that the Lord is God. In that knowledge our hopes will be real and triumphant. Even if we are surrounded by darkness we can be confident that the light will come. That is the meaning of the coming of the child into our midst.

This season is not a season of joy without reason. For his coming is the coming of one who brings a light into the darkness of human life, into the terrors of the chaotic moments that seem to dominate our lives. The light comes into darkness. We wait with Simeon for the coming of that light and perhaps with him we can ask God's blessing upon us for having seen the light that heralds the coming of salvation to all people.

Sermon preached by John. S. Morris at the First Baptist Church, Hamilton, NY

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