

A Sermon for the Feast of Presentation

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



*This text is an abridgment of a sermon preached in 1626 by **John Donne**, Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral, London. Although it was actually delivered on Christmas Day, it seems equally appropriate to the Presentation*, or indeed any manifestation (epiphany) of Christ's presence. John Donne was a leading figure among the Metaphysical Poets (17th century), and the influence of their "conceits" of comparison is evident here. Thus he compares Simeon, the priest, with members of the Church as a "royal priesthood"; the qualities which Simeon brought to his calling with those we ought to take with us to our invitation to Holy Communion; and the reception of Christ by Simeon in the temple with our reception in church by Christ ("At your mystical supper, today, Son of God, receive me as a communicant"). One of his best known works is Meditation XVII, which contains the famous lines: "No man is an island" and "Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".*



Now Lord lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation (Luke 2:29 & 30).

The whole life of Christ was a continual passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha (where he was crucified) even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then, the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first, as his cross at last. Every manifestation of Christ to the world, to the church, to a particular soul, is an epiphany. Now, there is nowhere a more evident manifestation of Christ than in that which induced this text, *Now Lord, lettest thou thy servant, etc.*

It had been revealed to Symeon (whose words these are) that he should see Christ before he died; and actually and really, substantially, essentially, bodily, presentially, personally he does see him; so it is Simeon's epiphany, so also all we have had another epiphany, another manifestation and application of Christ to ourselves.

We shall consider how Symeon was qualified and prepared, matured and disposed to that confidence, that he could desire to depart in peace, intimated in that first word *now*; now that all that I look for is accomplished, and farther expressed in the first word of the other clause, *For*; *for mine eyes have seen thy salvation*; *Now*, now the time is fulfilled, *For*, *for mine eyes have seen*. And then enters the second part; what is the greatest happiness that can be well wished in this world, by a man well prepared, is that he may depart in peace: *Now Lord, lettest thou, etc.*

And all the way, in every step that we make, in his light (in Simeon's light) we shall see light; we shall consider that that preparation and disposition, and acquiescence which Symeon had in his epiphany, in his visible seeing of Christ then, is offered to us in this manifestation and application of Christ in the Sacrament; and that therefore every penitent, and devout, and reverend, and worthy receiver hath had in that holy action his *Now*, there, are all things accomplished to him and his *For, for his eyes have seen his salvation* and so may be content, nay glad, *to depart in peace*.

We consider first the action itself, what was done at this time. At this time, our Saviour Christ, according to the law, by which all the first born were to be presented to God in the temple at a certain time after their birth, was presented to God in the temple, and there acknowledged to be his, and then bought of him again by his parents at a certain price prescribed in the law. God made all mankind of one blood; and with one blood, the blood of his son, he bought all mankind again; at one price, and upon the same conditions, he hath delivered over all into this world. This is the price of all: "believe, and live well".

At how cheap a price was Christ tumbled up and down in this world! It does almost take off our pious scorn of the low price at which Judas sold him, to consider that his Father sold him to the world for nothing; and then, when he had him again, by this new title of primogeniture and presentation, he sold him to the world again, if not for a turtle, or for a pigeon, yet at most for five shekels.

And yet you have had him cheaper than that, to-day in the Sacrament: whom hath Christ cost five shekels there? As Christ was presented to God in the temple, so is he presented to God in the Sacrament; not sucking, but bleeding. And God gives him back again to thee; and at what price? Upon this exchange; take his first born, Christ Jesus, and give him thine. Who is thine? The heart is the first part of the body that lives; give him that; and then, as it is in nature, it shall be in grace too, the last part that dies; for it shall never die. If a man, in exchange of his heart, receive Christ Jesus himself, he can no more die than Christ Jesus himself can die.

We pass on now to the consideration of some such qualities and dispositions of this person, Simeon, as may be applicable to us in our having received the Sacrament. First then, we receive it, though not literally, and expressly in the story, yet by convenient implication there, and by general tradition from all, that Symeon was now come to a great age, a very old man, a *presbyter*, an elder. This assistance we have to the exaltation of our devotion, from that circumstance, that Symeon was an old man, we have another from another, that he was a priest, and in that notion

and capacity the better fitted for this manifestation of Christ.

We have not this neither in the letter of the story, no, nor so constantly in tradition, that he was a priest, as that he was an old man; but it is rooted in antiquity too, in Athanasius, in St. Cyril, in Epiphanius, in others, who argue, and infer it fairly and conveniently, out of some priestly acts which Symeon seems to have done in the temple, (as the taking of Christ in his arms, which belongs to the priest, and the blessing of God, which is the thanksgiving to God in the behalf of the congregation, and then the blessing of the people in the behalf of God, which are acts peculiar to the priest). All nations, says Josephus, had some peculiar way [of ennobling people]; and amongst the Jews, says he, priesthood was that way.

Therefore hath the apostle, not knighted nor ennobled, but crowned every good soul with that style, *that they are a royal priesthood*. To be royal without priesthood seemed not to him dignity enough. It is farther added for his honour, and for his competency and fitness for this Epiphany, to see his Saviour, that he was a *just and righteous man*; though more seems to be implied in his other character, that he was *devout*. This *eulabeia*, [which] we translate devout, is a middle disposition between a Pharisical superstition and a negligent irreverence, and profanation of God's ordinance.

He was one that had the Holy Ghost upon him and [it] is agreed the Holy Ghost was upon him in the spirit of prophecy, so as that he made him at that time a prophet. There are more elements in the making up of this man; many more. He waited, says his story; he gave God his leisure. Symeon had informed himself, out of Daniel and the other prophets, that the time of the Messiah's coming was near; as Daniel had informed himself out of Jeremiah and the other prophets, that the time of the deliverance from Babylon was near. Both waited patiently, and yet both prayed for the accelerating of that which they waited for; Daniel for the deliverance, Symeon for the epiphany.

He waited, says the story, and he waited for the consolation of Israel. It is not an appropriating of hopes, or possessions of those hopes, to himself, but a charitable desire of a communication of this consolation upon all the Israel of God. Therefore is the Sacrament a communion; therefore is the church, which is built of us, *built of lively stones* (I Peter 2, 5) and in such buildings, every stone is supported by another, and supports another. To this purpose, to testify his devotion to the communion of saints, Symeon came into the temple, says the story; to do a holy work in a holy place.

He came to a holy place, and he came by a holy motion, by the spirit, says his

evidence; without holiness no man shall see God; not so well without holiness of the place; but not there neither, if he trust only to the holiness of the place, and bring no holiness with him. All that we consider in Simeon, and apply from Symeon to a worthy receiver of the Sacrament, is how he was fitted to depart in peace. All those pieces which we have named, conduce to that; but all those are collected into that one which remains yet: that his eyes had seen that salvation; for that was the accomplishment and fulfilling of God's word; *according to thy word*.

All that God had said should be done, was done; for, as it is said, ver. 26, it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ; and now his eyes had seen that salvation. Abraham saw this before, but only with the eye of faith, and yet rejoiced to see it so; he was glad even of that. Symeon saw it before this time, then, when he was illustrated with that revelation he saw it, but only with the eye of hope; of such hope Abraham had no such ground, no particular hope, no promise, that he should see the Messiah in his time; Symeon had, and yet he waited, he attended God's leisure. His desire was come, he saw his salvation. He saw it, according to his word: that is, so far as God had promised he should see it.

He saw not how that God, which was in this child, and which was this child, was the son of God. The manner of that eternal generation he saw not. He saw not how this Son of God became man in a virgin's womb, whom no man knew; the manner of this incarnation he saw not, for this eternal generation and this miraculous incarnation fell not within that "according to thy word". God had promised Symeon nothing concerning those mysteries; but the Lord's salvation, and his salvation, Symeon saw, and saw with bodily eyes. Beloved, in the blessed, and glorious, and mysterious Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ Jesus, thou seest the Lord's salvation, and thy salvation; and that thus far with bodily eyes.

Who can fear the darkness of death, that hath had the light of this world, and of the next, too? Who can fear death this night, that hath had the Lord of life in his hand to-day? Origen asks in this case: "When wilt thou dare to go out of this world, if thou darest not go now, when Christ Jesus hath taken thee by the hand to lead thee out?" This, then, is truly to depart in peace; by the gospel of peace, to the God of peace. My body is my prison, and I would be so obedient to the law as not to break prison; I would not hasten my death by starving or macerating this body; but if this prison be burnt down by continual fevers, or blown down with continual vapours, would any man be so in love with that ground upon which that prison stood, as to desire rather to stay there than to go home?

If thou didst depart from that table [i.e. Holy Communion] in peace, thou canst

depart from this world in peace. And the peace of that table is, to come to it with a contented mind, and with an enjoying of those temporal blessings which thou hast, without macerating thyself, without usurping upon others, without murmuring at God; and to be at that table, in the peace of the church, without the spirit of contradiction or inquisition, without uncharitableness towards others, without curiosity in thyself.

And then to come from that table with a bosom peace in thine own conscience in that seal of thy reconciliation, in that Sacrament; that so, riding at that anchor, and in that calm, whether God enlarge thy voyage by enlarging thy life, or put thee into the harbour, by the breath, by the breathlessness of death, either way, east or west, thou mayest depart in peace according to his word, that is, as he shall be pleased to manifest his pleasure upon thee.

The name of the feast, *Υπαπαντή*, is often translated as “Meeting” in English, but in fact means “going out and welcoming someone”, so “Reception” would be better. Also known as Candlemas. [JWL]