
Practicing Release with the Song of Simeon

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
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I love my church staff, and I value the rhythm of our life together. As we live and pray through the seasons of the year, we really do see the presence of God. So, we take that rhythm and those customs seriously.

But we know we have to keep up with trends and gossip and buzz. So it was my pleasure a few years ago to take a staff retreat together, for a day at one of the new “emergent church” presentations. We would visit a local seminary who was hosting many of the big names in emergent church circles.

I remember that we arrived a touch early, and we quickly became fascinated with the set-up. Those were the days when Apple computer products were fetishes. The main speaker actually hugged his Apple MacBook, or whatever it was. The technology nerds behaved exactly like sacristans before an Anglo-Catholic high church mass, fussing with this and that, and caressing every object like it was a household god.

When the assembly was ready, the main guy stood forth and said he was going to introduce a new song. This is a really cool piece, he said, and I want you all to learn it. We braced ourselves for whatever it was going to be. In fact, we wanted to learn something new; that’s why we were there.

With that, he started in on the words: *Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.*

Yes, it was the same Kyrie, or almost the same one, that we have been singing for centuries in our classical churches.

This evening, I salute the classics, those customary prayers and canticles we use steadily in the Church, but sometimes without pausing to value. These old stones of our liturgies provide the foundation of our common prayer, even though we sometimes stumble over them without discovering them.

Knowing the classical prayers of our service, to me, is like knowing musical scales before one is playing music. I play a lot of jazz piano, and people ask me what they should do to learn to play jazz. “Learn the scales,” I say. Learn the basic scales, over and over, and then play whatever you want.

Other and better artists have said the same thing, as you know: Picasso, Beethoven. Learn the rules. Practice them, over and over again, so that you will know when to break them.

So, in the evenings, we say the *Nunc Dimittis*. Today, it is worth pondering these words from a man called Simeon.

We have many translations floating through the church these days: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.” “Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised. For these eyes of mine have seen the

savior.”

We say these words at the end of the day, hoping that the mood of Simeon might be ours at the end of the day. This canticle is for those who can pause and realize that we have been waiting for something, maybe for a long time.

We think of Simeon having waited all his life, and maybe having grown old. But the text does not say exactly that he was old. His associate, Anna, was given an age, but he isn't. He could have been as young as you or me.

At whatever age, he was stuck in that waiting. He was waiting for release. The word “set free” or “dismiss” really means release. Simeon was waiting for release from something.

At the end of the day, it helps to consider where we have been stuck, what we need release from, and what we might be waiting for. It may be some bondage, or some sin, that we need release from.

Or it may just be release from the old so that we can experience the new.

I have begun to think of the confession of sin, not as the confession of some great mistake or minor error, but as simply the shedding of the old for the new.

Did anyone see that enormous black snake crawling around this chapel on Sunday afternoon? I know a couple of you saw it. I enjoy snakes, though I also have a healthy fear of them. Have you ever seen one shed its skin? The way snakes shed their skin is the way I think about confession. One day, when God's time is ready, the snake simply presses against some firm limb or object, and slides out of its skin, revealing, however, a fresh new one. The new one has been growing under the old all the time. The confession of sin is simply the shedding of one skin so that the new one, one that God has been preparing, can emerge.

Lord, you now have set your servant free. I can let go!

Whatever it is that allows us to let go in life, to be forgiven, to shed some skin -- that is Christ. That is what caused Simeon to sing. And even when we are just as confused and bewildered as Mary and Joseph, we can sing, too.

We say this prayer of release daily, not because we have daily committed atrocious sin. But because there are inner thoughts that have also assaulted us daily. We have had our hearts pierced by swords. We have been stymied by contradictions, over and over again, from which we need release.

Oh, that God could release us from our own inner contradictions and vain hopes, our false hopes, conceited desires, egomaniacal fantasies. The end of each day is the time to give them up, to send them away, to dismiss them.

T.S. Eliot examined these dismissals quite explicitly in his poem, called, not “The Song of Simeon,” but “A Song For Simeon.” In these lines, the speaker resigns himself to the reality that he will not be the great mystic saint he might hope for.

“Light upon light,
Mounting the saints' stair
Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision.
Grant me thy peace.”

One day, the words of the *Nunc Dimittis* might also be spoken at our funeral: as you know, that service which is our final prayer in church, during the day of our ultimate release.

But we practice this canticle daily, practicing release, over and over again, so that, when our ultimate death occurs, and this canticle is said at our funerals – why, then it will not be unfamiliar to us. We have been practicing for it. Practicing release. Practicing shedding our skin, so that when our spirit sheds this skin, a resurrection body will appear.

This is the Christ whom God has prepared for all the world to see, a light that enlightens the world. Wherever forgiveness is, this is Christ, the light of the world. Wherever release is, this is Christ, the light of the world: the gracious light, which wakes us up every day of our lives.

Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

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