

Homily, St. Andrew's
Christmas 1, Dec 28, 2014
Luke 2:22-40

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What's on your bucket list? I'm not sure where the phrase originated but it was certainly made more popular by the movie "The Bucket List" several years back starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. The movie was about two terminally ill men who escape from a cancer ward and head off on a road trip with a wish list of to-dos before they die. I don't think I've actually seen the movie but the idea of having a bucket list - a list of adventures or experiences to have before one dies - is certainly popular. So, what's on your bucket list? [I've never ridden in a helicopter... and would love to one day! I also think it would be cool to ride an elephant.]

As we hear the completion of the nativity story, as recounted in the Gospel of Luke today, we hear the completion of a bucket list. For the law of the Lord to be properly fulfilled, Jesus' early life needed to follow Jewish tradition and practice of the day. This meant having Jesus circumcised, thereby marking him as a member of the Jewish community. And as Jesus was a first-born, it also meant consecrating him to the Lord by redeeming him, or bringing him back, to present him in the Temple and offer sacrifice in thanksgiving. Finally, Mary needed to offer sacrifice at the Temple following a time of ceremonial uncleanness that followed the birth of a child. The details of what was required by Jewish law and how it is recorded by Luke are a bit mixed up but the point is that Joseph and Mary were devout members of the community and following Jesus' birth, everything was done properly, according to the law of the Lord.

It all seems like a lot for one baby but then, isn't the arrival of a baby always followed by much fanfare, excitement and ritual?!? In between, that is, the average, everyday stresses of child-rearing, particularly in those early days. Jesus might be the Son of God, but Mary was still a brand new mother and Joseph was still a brand new father. And like many new parents, they were probably sleep-deprived and overwhelmed at the lifetime of responsibility of raising this child. How much more pressure would be added due to the strange and miraculous circumstances of his conception and birth? Mary might have the honour of bearing the Son of God, but in those early days, she also probably wondered... Is he eating enough? why won't he sleep properly? is he too cold? too hot? sick? It seems to me that thinking about the salvation of the world would be a little too much to consider in those early days of child-rearing! But still, they do everything properly.

In the process of following tradition, another gift comes to them, from the righteous and devout man, Simeon. Simeon's piety and hope are highlighted as he is described in relationship to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Holy Spirit figures prominently in the story, being mentioned 3 times in as many verses. The Holy Spirit rests on Simeon because he hopes for "the restoration of the people and the fulfillment of God's redemptive work," and he had come to believe that he would see the Lord's Messiah before he died. (NIB, 70) Deeply in touch with this sense of intuition and guidance, the Spirit of God lead Simeon to the Temple that day and upon encountering Mary and Joseph with their baby Jesus, Simeon sings out praises: "Master, now

you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (2:29-32)

I have a friend from seminary for whom this short poem, known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, was his favourite. As a choir boy growing up in England, he knew that when he sang the words “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...” the service of evening prayer was almost over and he would soon get to go home. Any which way you slice it, whether it’s simply the end of the day, or the salvation of the world, these words represent such fulfillment.

And what a gift to receive this fulfillment of a life’s hope, a life’s work, a life’s dream, as peace, as Simeon did. It is not always so. Too often, people shy away from the fulfillment of their hearts desire, or their life goals, for fear of what might happen next. It’s well known, for instance, that graduate students can have a hard time completing a thesis because when it’s done, school’s over and something else needs to begin. There could be all manner of examples of stalling or self-sabotaging to create failure as a subconscious way to avoid the change, or the deep transformation, that fulfillment brings. Worse, fulfilling a dream, a goal or a desire can be fearful because the reality of fulfillment may not live up to the hype, the expectation even the hope that came before. All too often, the reality of marriage, of a career, or of a new baby, is much tougher than the desire and dreams that drove us to seek them in the first place. And so all too often, we live lesser or smaller lives that may be safe and comfortable, but are rarely spectacular.

I suspect that’s some of the psychology underlying the idea of the “bucket list”, at least as popularized by the movie. If someone has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, all bets are off and they can go for it in living a spectacular life. Another phrase popular among the younger set that expresses a similar spirit without a sense of ending is “YOLO.” It stands for “you only live once” and it’s used as an encouragement to live a life full of adventure, if perhaps a little too recklessly at times. I first learned about it on a tour in Costa Rica a while ago when I was considering bungy jumping and my tour mates called out: “YOLOooo!” The sense of it is to go for it in living a spectacular life, because if not now, then when? I didn’t bungy jump that day, and I don’t know if I ever will, and my life can be complete without it, but I appreciate the sentiment, the spirit, of living well - living courageously, using our failures as just another step towards success.

Simeon knew that kind of living... not living recklessly by taking unnecessary risks, but Simeon lived faithfully and courageously in praying and seeking the fulfillment God’s promise for the consolation of Israel, the fulfillment of God’s redemptive work. Simeon had the faith to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple that day, and he had the openness to see Jesus for who he is, even if a baby isn’t the form of redemption he’d been expecting. Simeon’s righteousness and piety led him to praise God at his encounter with Jesus, the completion of the most important item on his bucket list, and brought him peace. His song of praise doesn’t necessarily “refer to Simeon’s death... [as] Simeon had been watching for the coming of the Lord’s anointed, and now as a faithful watchman he is dismissed from his post by his master... Simeon recognizes that he is being released from his mission to watch for the coming of the Messiah because he has now seen the coming of the one who will bring salvation.”

(NIB, 71) Maybe it's time to add another few items to his bucket list, or maybe it's just time to live the rest of his days in peace and contentment.

May we know such peace today... the peace of God and the peace from God, that when the fulfillment of our most heartfelt desires, our toughest goals and our hard fought dreams comes, God will open us up in new and wonderful ways. And as we praise God for the salvation that has come to us, may we seek to live fearless, faithful and spectacular lives, in service of God.