

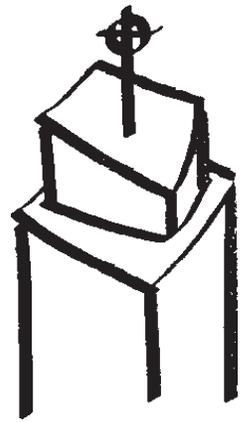
OUR FAMILY



NEWS

For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

November &
December, 2011





Simeon's Sword Reconsidered

The following informal essay was written as a tribute to Fr. James, who, as most of you know, has an intense devotion to the Blessed Mother, one that he has fruitfully shared with many of you through spiritual direction, oblate days of recollection, and this very organ of the oblate program. The question that the essay addresses may seem a minor one, but, as I hope the essay itself demonstrates, is one that has some major implications for the ways in which we think about and pay honor to the Mother of God.

This coming Church year, Year B in the liturgical cycle, the gospel for the feast of the Holy Family will be the account of the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Luke 2:22-40. We shall again hear Simeon pronounce his two poetic oracles:

Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,
a light of revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel.

and

Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be contradicted
(and you yourself a sword will pierce)
so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

I suspect that many of us, on hearing that parenthesized prophecy about Mary—"and you yourself a sword will pierce"—will conjure up the image of her at the foot of the cross. This association, encouraged if not engendered by such popular devotions as the Seven Sorrows of Mary and the Stations of the Cross and even by the liturgical feast of Our Lady of Sorrows—legitimate and salutary as these may be—alas, from a biblical point of view, simply "misses the mark." What is unfortunate is not so much the error in biblical interpretation itself but the ineluctable result it has of preventing the listener from seeing and understanding an important point that St. Luke makes about the person of Mary in his gospel.

Why is the association of Simeon's sword with the image of Mary at the foot of the cross scripturally "off the mark"? Because, quite simply, Luke, the only evangelist to recount the story of Jesus' presentation, makes no mention in his gospel of Mary being present at the crucifixion. In fact, the sole evangelist to do that is John. If there is an answer to the question of what it is to which Luke, through Simeon, is referring, certainly it can be found only somewhere in Luke's own gospel.

And what is the aforementioned point that Luke makes about the person of Mary, the one that many of us are apt to miss? To properly answer this question requires an examination of Luke's entire treatment of Mary in his gospel: what he says about her and how he says it.

Mary first appears in the scene of the annunciation. Her reply to God's extraordinary overture to her was, as Luke gives it, likewise extraordinary: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38). Edward Schillebeeckx wrote perceptively of the nature of this response:

In the first place she called herself the “handmaid of the Lord” and then replied, in answer to God’s offer, “Be it done to me according to thy word.” She did not, it should be noted, reply, “Yes, I will. I accept.” She was clearly aware that what was about to happen was not to be brought about by human means, but was purely the work of grace, and that the task which was implied in it—her ensuring motherhood of the Child she was to conceive—was a divine commission. A reply such as “Yes, I accept” seemed to her to be too ambitious. Indeed, to be more exact, it simply did not occur to her to reply in such a way. In mystic simplicity, she merely said—“May it be so,” or “May it be accomplished in me.” In this, Mary showed her absolute receptivity, her completely free and open attitude....

Mary’s response was thus one of utter compliance with God’s will, that is, of compliance that was total (given in regard to all that would be asked of her), absolute (given with every fiber of her being, with all her powers of mind and heart, body and soul), and irrevocable (given for all time and for eternity).

Maria Boulding expressed with great lyricism the unique character of Mary’s undertaking:

...Mary was being asked to make the leap of faith in response to God’s self-offer and invitation. There were no models for understanding, no comforting precedents, because this thing had never happened before. The flesh-taking of the Son of God was much more than a fulfillment of Israel’s expectations, much more than a satisfactory tying-up of all the strands of hope; it was the unheard-of gift, the breaking in of the wholly new thing.

But she noted too, no less lyrically, its similarity to the undertakings of her faith-filled Israelite forebears:

Like the prophets and the anonymous believers before her, she let go of familiar intelligible patterns and ways of relating to God and the universe, of those frameworks which had genuinely supported meaning hitherto, and were indeed God-given. ...[S]he let go of her securities, faced the mis-understanding, bore the shame, accepted her own bewilderment and risk. She was herself reborn to a new existence, that she might bring forth life for many.

Even before the prophets, of course, there had been Abraham, *the* person of faith of the Old Covenant as Mary would become of the New Covenant. He had been asked to make his own leap of faith, and however short it may have fallen of Mary’s in terms of its object (what was to be believed), it well foreshadowed hers in terms of its all-encompassing nature (how that what was to be believed).

As St. Paul wrote, twice no less, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6). Abraham learned that, in the words of Wilfrid Harrington, “the way, the only way, of standing right with God...is to let God be God *in his way*.” And he learned the meaning of the Lord’s declaration, long before the prophet Isaiah enunciated it, “My ways are not your ways” (Is 55:8).

“*In his way*.” “According to your word.” Inherent in Mary’s response to God was the readiness for anything and everything that her compliance would entail. And entailments there were. Luke, early on, deftly both intimates what they were and shows Mary gradually but assuredly discovering and coming to terms with them. He depicts her, in other words, as being engaged in what today we would call a “learning process” as the identity and mission of her Son were increasingly made manifest to her through other people and through events.

Twice, once shortly before the episode of the presentation in the temple and once shortly after, in something of a literary framing device, Luke explicitly states that Mary pondered “things”:

[The shepherds] went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. (Lk 2:16-19)

and

When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. (Lk 2:48-51)

And as a clue both to Mary and to us that the sword about which Simeon prophesies in his *second* oracle will be for Mary something both unexpected and discoverable only in God's good time, in another case of God being God "*in his way*," Luke has Simeon echo Mary's own crucial words in his *first* oracle: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, / *according to your word...*" In that short phrase lies the key to the meaning of Simeon's prophecy, at which it is at long last time to take a closer look.

Simeon's statement has an admittedly easy-to-miss yet unmistakable antecedent in a verse from the Old Testament, Ezechiel 14:17, the language of the former being strongly reminiscent of that of the latter, which runs: "Or if I brought the sword upon this country, commanding the sword to pass through the land cutting off from it man and beast..." The verse occurs in a section of Ezechiel's prophecy that deals with one of the prophet's favorite and recurring subjects, that of personal moral responsibility:

Son of man, when a land sins against me by breaking faith, I stretch out my hand against it and break its staff of bread, I let famine loose upon it and cut off from it both man and beast; and even if these three men were in it, Noah, Daniel, and Job, they could save only themselves by their virtue, says the Lord God. If I were to cause wild beasts to prowl the land, depopulating it so that it became a waste, traversed by none because of the wild beasts, and these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, I swear they could save neither sons nor daughters; they alone would be saved, and the land would be a waste. Or if I brought the sword upon this country, commanding the sword to pass through the land cutting off from it man and beast, and these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, they would be unable to save either sons or daughters; they alone would be saved. Or if I were to send pestilence into this land, pouring out upon it my bloodthirsty fury, cutting off from it man and beast, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, I swear that they could save neither son nor daughter; they would save only themselves by their virtue. (Ez 14:13-20)

The sword of verse 17 is a sword of judgment that discriminates between the guilty and the guiltless and metes out punishment accordingly. The sword spoken of by Simeon in Luke 2:35 has a similar context of personal moral choice, of taking decisive stands, of choosing sides, with serious consequences—all because of "this child." And like Ezechiel's emphasis in the fourteenth chapter of his prophecy, Simeon's emphasis is on the morally guilty and the consequences for them. The child is to be a sign that many will affirm but that many others (many *more*, it would seem) will contradict. Those who accept Jesus will rise as a result of doing so; those who reject him will fall as a result, their inmost thoughts being laid bare in the process (patently *their* thoughts, for the word used for these thoughts in the original Greek, *dialogismoi*, is always used by New Testament writers to refer to unwholesome thoughts). As Raymond E. Brown summarized, "Simeon proclaims that a discriminatory judgment will come upon Israel and that it will touch Mary too, as an individual Israelite."

So what scene in Luke's gospel shows how Mary is so affected? A scene that Luke spotlights, as it were, by making it the only scene in his gospel, after the infancy narrative, in which Mary appears: that wherein, during Jesus' public ministry, "his mother and his brothers" come to him but are unable to join him because of the crowd (Lk 8:19-21). Informed of the situation, Jesus says in reply, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it." In effect, Jesus answers that he now has a new family, henceforth his only true family, which has been, as Brown pointed out, "established by the proclamation of the kingdom" and which "consists not in physical relationship but in a relationship of obedience to the will of the Father." Brown went on to say of the scene, "Clearly it is a discriminatory scene putting the demands of God above the privilege of human relationship," a scene in which both Mary and we find out that she must "meet the same discriminatory demand as all others." Because Mary is the only adult in Luke's infancy narrative who survives into the period of her Son's public ministry and, beyond that, into the period of the Church, when Luke earlier presents Mary as continuously pondering "things," he is "hinting," as Brown put it, "that later on she would discover the real meaning of all the marvelous happenings

associated with Bethlehem. Through Simeon's oracle Luke tells us that part of this discovery will be that she too has to face the judgment implied in Jesus' proclamation."

This is precisely the point that St. Luke makes about the person of Mary in his gospel that can be lost for those who automatically associate Simeon's sword with Mary at the foot of the cross. She who conceived, carried in her womb, and gave birth to God's word made flesh could be judged righteous only by the same standard by which Abraham was so judged: a living, active belief in that word. Mary's physical claim upon her Son did not exempt her from what is required of us lesser mortals who would likewise lay claim to him: to hear the word of God and act on it. Like each of us, she had to fulfill this requirement in order to be counted a member of Jesus' true family; like each of us, she had to fulfill this requirement in order to gain entry into his kingdom; like each of us, she had to become his disciple.

And thus this essay is brought full circle, for this remarkable insight of St. Luke naturally and necessarily leads right back to the first component of his treatment of Mary that was considered: the episode of Luke 8:19-21 refers back to the episode of Luke 1:26-38, the annunciation. As Brown said further of the former,

...[S]ince Luke has already shown Mary as doing the will of God at the time of the annunciation (1:38), he suggests here that she will be a positive exception to the generally negative reaction in Israel which is the subject of Simeon's prophecy. For her Jesus will not be a sign to be contradicted but a sign to be affirmed.

That is, even before Mary discovered the requirement that she had to fulfill, she had already fulfilled it. Luke portrays her as a disciple—the *perfect* disciple, in fact—from the very beginning. Any attempt to adequately analyze all of this in terms of irony and paradox, it seems to me, would be doomed from the outset: one would be dealing with divine irony and divine paradox, which, like the peculiarly Christian logic of "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34b), defy ordinary scrutiny.

Karl Rahner, I believe, summed up the entire matter with his usual clarity and precision:

The divine motherhood of the blessed Virgin is...God's grace alone, and her own act, inseparably. It is not simply a physical motherhood, it is her grace and her deed, placing her whole self, body and soul, at the service of God and his redemptive mercy to mankind.

Finally...I called the point which it has been the aim of this essay to uncover and elucidate an important one. Why? Well, it seems to me that to miss it is to miss St. Luke's essential teaching about the Mother of God, namely, that, as Brown stated it, "Mary's greatness stems from the way she made that decision to become a disciple by hearing God's word and doing it." The practical implications of this for a Christian's baptismal commitment, vocation, and spiritual life are many, and rather than try to enumerate them myself, I invite you to—like Mary—"reflect" and to try to make some discoveries of your own.

—Br. Nathaniel Grossmann, O.S.B.

Oblate Cecilia Jais is now a resident of Heritage Manor in Peru. She enjoys having visitors and no doubt would welcome cards and letters as well. Her address is as follows: 2021 Plum St., Peru, IL 61354. Let us all keep Cecilia in our prayers.

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Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, *Our Family News*, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

All meetings are held in the abbey church from
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13

Sunday, December 4, 2011

Sunday, January 8, 2012

Sunday, February 12, 2012

Sunday, March 11, 2012

Sunday, April 15, 2012

Sunday, May 6, 2012

Scripture for Group *Lectio* at the November Meeting

Let the heavens rejoice, let the
earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all
that is in it;
let the fields be jubilant, and
everything in them.
Then all the trees of the forest
will sing for joy;
they will sing before the
Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in
righteousness
and the peoples in his truth.

Ps 96 (95):11-13

Copies of this passage will be made available at the
meeting.

Oblate Lending Library: Help!

Over the years, a great number of books have been checked out of the oblate lending library but not returned. These include, unfortunately, many works that can be considered essential, the finest things of their kind in print.

Would you be so kind as to jog your memory or check your bookshelves to discover whether or not *you* have any of the missing books and, if you do, to return what you have?

If you live at some distance from the abbey, you might consider using the United States Postal Service, which offers free containers (boxes and envelopes, even padded envelopes upon request) for items sent by flat-rate priority mail, and free boxes for smaller books sent by reduced-rate media mail. For larger books, boxes or padded envelopes would have to be provided by you, but they could likewise be sent by reduced-rate media mail. Were you to find, nevertheless, the cost of shipping prohibitive, Br. Nathaniel would be happy to help you out.

Books returned by shipping should be sent to:

Oblate Library
St. Bede Abbey
24 W US Highway 6
Peru, IL 61354

Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the school year, the monk's schedule is as follows.

6:00 A.M. Morning Prayer*
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:00 P.M. Conventual Mass**
7:20 P.M. Evening Prayer***

* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.

** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M. and on Monday, 7:30 A.M.

*** on Sunday, 5:30 P.M.

