

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Luke 2:25-38.

We were noting in our earlier meditation that Simeon embodies all that relates to an end-time, and that in an end-time a peculiar set of conditions arises. On the one side, there is a sense of disintegration with regard to what has been, and on the other hand a sense of something pending, a new situation and a new set of conditions coming, with certain very definite and serious issues arising in the meantime. Firstly, it may be asked, how much of all that has been is going to survive and be carried on into the new situation? - for a great stripping is taking place, a great sifting of the spiritual as over against the temporal, even in relation to the things of God. Or (to come to the figure here of Simeon taking in his arms the child Jesus) how much of the Lord have we really got in hand in a time of transition and of break-up and of pending new conditions? On the other hand, how much of all that is associated with the Lord is after all of that external order and system which is purely earthly and transitory, temporal, the framework, the mould of things? These are very important questions and issues, and they are all forced in at a time when things are about to change. Then very grave strain and pressure and conflict comes into the atmosphere. It is as though something is about to be brought forth which stirs the enemy to his utmost resistance, oppression and frustration, so much so that at such a time the whole fabric of the spiritual life is under strain and test, and it would be much easier to give up or take some line of less resistance. These are things which belong to an end-time, and we were noting that there is no doubt that we are in such a time today. That is the significance of this very hour. Things are going to change radically, one order is going to pass and another to come in. But amidst this sifting ordeal today, there can be, and should be, that which answers to the case of Simeon, who was the embodiment firstly of all the spiritual values that had been, and then of the break-up of all that was not spiritual and permanent, being but a framework of things in the past dispensation; and further, the embodiment of the principles and intrinsic values of what was coming. That is very briefly and broadly what occupied us in our previous meditation.

SIMEON HAD VISION

But now we are going to note one dominant factor about Simeon as representing this end-time, transition period. This dominant factor, which is also a dominant necessity, is contained in the one word 'vision.' Although Simeon and Anna were so old, they had vision; which meant that, although they were at an end of one phase and naturally might just have closed down, and so an end have come to everything, they had instead a new beginning in their hands, something more ahead than ever had been before. That matter of vision is of tremendous, of superlative, importance, for, as we are going to see more fully, these two people embody the whole principle of service to God at a most critical time in the development of His interests. Service will only be of a transient character and very limited in its value and range if there is no vision: it will be something that is being done for itself and largely as an end in itself, and that is not adequate. Service must have a far greater range of significance than that of just doing a thing, something done for the time, with the one concerned seeing nothing beyond the thing with which he is immediately occupied. That means limitation, transience, poverty in service. Vision always carries forward beyond the present, and adds in something, so that what is being done contains more than itself in time and in value.

THE EFFECT OF VISION**1. LIFE**

See how vision was really the vital thing in Simeon's case, what manifold effects it had upon himself. Here is an old man who, according to all natural laws, is at the end of his life and may die any day. People would be saying about him, 'We should never be surprised to hear old Simeon had gone;' and yet vision kept him alive. He could not die, because he had a God-given vision. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. "Mine eyes have SEEN!" Here is a man with eyes in his old age, a man who is seeing; and there is a power in that seeing which casts him forward, and puts death back, making it a servant rather than a lord. He can say to death, 'You must wait my time, the Lord's time.' Vision kept him alive, and transcended all the ordinary course and laws, making him the master of them all, giving him ascendancy.

Whatever it may have meant in his case as to his natural life, his length of days on the earth, that has to be transferred to the spiritual realm. Of course, there is a direction in which it still holds good physically. If God has given a vision and bound up the realisation of it, even in some measure, with the life of a chosen vessel, that man or that woman, that vessel, is immortal until the work is done. That one can cry with the Psalmist - "I shall not die, but live" (Psa. 118:17). But you have to be possessed of a vision of God's intention so much that

your life is bound up with it. Well, his vision kept Simeon alive. There is a tremendously vitalizing effect about true vision.

2. A LINK WITH GOD'S PURPOSE

There is a very great deal more in what I have said than perhaps you have recognized, and a great deal more to be said about it. To be a link with God's purpose by receiving from the Lord a vision of what that purpose is is a tremendously emancipating thing. It is one thing just to go on from day to day and week to week and year to year in a kind of piecemeal way: we go to the meeting today and to the conference next weekend, and that is repeated again and again, and so the whole rota of Christian activity and occupation is just something in itself. It is quite another thing to be caught up in the grip and the throb of a mighty, dominating vision corporately, so that the very atmosphere seems to proclaim there is something more than just the occasion - there is something big, something far-reaching in this - and you are brought into it by the Holy Spirit. You come in, as did Simeon, in the Spirit. You find you have not just joined something, linked yourself on with some thing which goes along as on wheels which are square, bumping over and bumping over, but you are in a course, like the wheels of Ezekiel's vision, full of life, going straight forward - tremendous vision! - to One in the Throne. There is a great deal of difference. You may be able to mark in your own minds the difference between these things - on the one hand the thing that is just something in itself, that is just going on, being kept going perhaps by its own momentum or drive, or by other interests brought in, something very much an end in itself, and it does not matter very much whether you go or come. On the other hand there is that which is so different - a coming right into line with the great purpose of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, seeing what God is after as far beyond the present attainment.

In the case of Simeon, it made him a living link with God's purpose. Here was the old, the passing dispensation, but in it were spiritual investments of God. Here was the new dispensation, introduced by the coming of Christ. Simeon stood as a link joining those two, and he was a very living link indeed. We are coming to the time when a great many changes are going to take place in the set system of Christendom, and when the spiritual will alone be of account, and when it will be of vital consequence that God should have a people who are a link with His fuller purpose. He has always required such. If we were inclined to do so, we could go back to the Bible and mark transition periods again and again, and see just what God put in at the point of transition as His link between the two, and as His bridge from the one to the other. But there is the fact. If we have any reason to believe that such a change is imminent, when it will not be possible to carry on the old lines and to go on organizing things with all the old machinery, and when the people of God are going to be forced by world conditions on to a spiritual ground where their concern will be just the Lord Himself, if we have any reason to feel that has commenced, then this must follow - that there should be something that becomes for God a ministry which links on with His fuller purpose, which stands vitally related to Him in His greater intentions, which brings in the Lord in fullness. Simeon did that, and so became himself the sign of a dispensational movement, a living link with God's fuller purpose.

3. A WALK WITH GOD

Another effect that vision had upon Simeon was that it kept him walking with God, it gave him spiritual incentive, it made a spiritual man of him. I am sure you will agree that we very much need spiritual incentive. It is a question which is always very present. What is everything for? What is it all about? What is the good of it all? We can very often lose heart. Cannot you lose heart in the work of God as you look out on the spiritual condition of things? If you have any vision of what God wants, your heart can sink as you see how things are in comparison. It is a poor kind of spiritual vision that can be satisfied with things as they are now. But, in the presence of this heartbreaking state, together with all the wearing out, frustration, resistance, hardness of the way, and the many difficulties and problems which come upon the people of God, we do need incentive, and that is only saying in another way that we do need vision. "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint" (disintegrate) (Prov. 29:18). Without vision they go to pieces, there is no doubt about that. But, you see, Simeon had vision and therefore in a day when things generally were most disappointing and unsatisfactory, when that which was really of the Lord was very small indeed, in that day by his vision he was a man throbbing with incentive. It kept him walking with God. We need something to keep us walking with God. It is so easy to let go and to drift. The prayer life is so difficult to maintain in strength. You have to fight for your prayer life: you lose it if you do not; and so with everything else in this walk with God. Everything is against it - the drag and the drain and the pressure. Unless we have vision, we shall not be walking with God. To walk with God for His own sake, out of pure love for Himself is, I suppose, the highest level at which we can aim, and we certainly need something to promote such love and maintain it. A man once said to me, 'It is the ministry that keeps me going as a Christian.' That is terrible; but what he meant was that he had to have incentive, something to hold him to the Lord. It is in that sense that I say this. Because Simeon had vision, this perception that the Lord had committed Himself to something great and that he himself was bound up with it, he lived near to the Lord and found his strength for a close walk with his God. It made him a spiritual man. He "came in the Spirit

into the temple;" he was evidently living in and walking by the Spirit, and that describes a spiritual man. How important, then, vision is.

4. A STRONG PRAYER LIFE

Again, vision made Simeon a man of prayer. It made Anna a woman of prayer, one who continued in fastings and supplications day and night. It was vision that did it. We must have a motive to maintain our prayer life, otherwise it becomes mechanical, something done, something that is an obligation, something that we are afraid not to do. Prayer is maintained in strength by vision.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY

And altogether Simeon was an accountable factor because of vision. How needed it is for everyone of the Lord's people to be an accountable factor. We speak of 'live wires,' really life points that count in the midst of all that is dark and drab and heavy and murky, or all that could turn us in on ourselves and keep us circling round with questions. We need to be factors that count in the things of God, and that is only produced by vision. Well, what will make us positive in function and in influence? for that is what we need to be. What will save us from drift and diversion and from snares? What will take mere nominalism and ordinariness and tentativeness and contentedness out of us? What will make us choose the best and not be satisfied with the good and argue that there is no harm in it? What will deliver us from all that sort of thing? Nothing but vision. The possession of true vision will save us. You will never be merely nominal if you have Divinely-given vision, you will be vital.

It is that which explains Paul, for if ever there was a vital man, an accountable man, a man of destiny, it was Paul; and do you remember that Paul always places himself alongside of all saints and never for a moment regards himself as above them in any way. He is always speaking about 'we, we, we', meaning himself and the other believers. What made him the vital, accountable man he was, able to say, "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19)? He had vision.

THE NEED FOR EXERCISE IN RELATION TO VISION

Well, you say, we agree, we do not dispute anything you have said, but we have not got vision; what about it? The point is we have to get before the Lord on this matter and ask Him to put us into His vision and His vision into us; otherwise we shall be mere passengers to be carried along, mere parasites living upon the life of others, and contributing nothing. We must really bring this to a practical issue with the Lord, and that is the whole point at this moment in what I am saying. No one can give you vision but the Lord. But to see God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus, to be able to say with Simeon, "Mine eyes have seen," makes a life of vital account. It was for that the Apostle prayed for others, 'that the eyes of their heart might be enlightened.' Well, when all has been said, it is something that calls us to exercise, for this is not something merely personal. This is something that touches the service of God in a critical time in the history of this world and of the people of God, in a movement of dispensations with great issues pending. Presently, mark you, there are going to be many of the Lord's own children and servants wondering where they are. They are going to have to leave their fields of service, and have all their work taken away, and they will be standing saying, 'What is the meaning of this? what does the future hold? where are we?' Ah, but that is not all. I have only used that by way of trying to focus the thing that is on my heart. We are moving quickly into a big change in the whole complexion of organized Christianity, and in such a time there has to be something that steadies things, that holds things for God, that understands the situation like Daniel and his friends in whom was the Spirit of wisdom. They knew the heavenly meaning of what was taking place and could interpret the happenings, save the situation and touch the ages.

You see what I mean. There must be something, and it is a very critical business. We must be in possession, and under the mastery, of this heavenly vision, the purpose of God. We must see the nature and meaning of what is happening, of the trend of things, the issues that are involved, and we must be found in co-operation with God in these movements of His from heaven, able to serve Him now.

If that seems altogether abstract and remote, let me bring it all to this: it is wholly a matter of a living and adequate measure of Christ. Come back to Simeon and Anna. All, probably, that onlookers saw was a little baby being brought to the temple for the common customs, as thousands and thousands of babies had been brought over the years. But these two saw in that child vast ranges - "Thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples; a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." Look at what is centred in that child. But you would not see it if you had not revelation. If you were not taught of the Spirit, you would not see the significance of Christ. These are truths which you can be told and believe, but has God revealed them in your heart? The time is coming when that will be the ground of testing; not doctrine, teaching, reading the Bible, but what you have in hand. For centuries men had been coming to the temple with their

The Importance of Vision

hands full of offerings of many kinds, meal offerings and other forms of offering: they were not allowed to appear with empty hands. But did they grasp the real significance of what was in their hands? Was it to them merely an offering of meal, a lamb, a ram, a goat, whatever the offering was - some thing? Was that the beginning and the end? Did they see? We know now that all that was a symbol of something very much more. We know it as teaching. We have had lectures on the tabernacle and its offerings and sacrifices. We know all about it technically, but what have we in hand? What will it be when the great shaking comes when we can no longer have meetings or the fellowship of believers, and perhaps have to endure what many out in other lands are under today? What have we got in hand? What has been revealed by the Holy Ghost? It is not merely a question of that in which we have been brought up and taught in meetings and conferences, but of what has really been revealed in us of Christ, of which we can say, "Mine eyes have seen." No one can take away from me what I have seen; nothing can destroy that; I have seen, and it has become a part of my very being. That is the crucial point in a day like this. We must be able to recognize the changing directions of things, and we must be able to move with God.

It was said of Simeon that "the Holy Spirit was upon him," and we live in a dispensation which is much more one of the Spirit than that. The Spirit is in us; not merely visiting and not only coming upon us, but abiding within. But because Simeon and Anna were in the Spirit, they knew the great significance of that moment. When the child Jesus was brought in, something happened within them which, to put it in a phrase, meant, 'This is that!' That is the ministry, that which you have in yourself by the Holy Spirit's working, enabling you to say, 'This is that, this is it!' It becomes something tremendously real, living, consequential. This is that! To be able thus by the Spirit to interpret God's meaning constitutes a ministry. We have yet to speak of how Simeon and Anna are the embodiment of the service principle, but we have got very near to what service to God really means. To begin with, it means vision.

If this in any way really touches your hearts, if you are in any measure able to perceive that this surely is the direction of things, may I ask that you will earnestly go to the Lord and be deeply exercised in prayer that you may have His vision? Seek that it may be in you, so that you will be able to serve the situation when a great deal is collapsing. Even if it could be said that we are not yet in the emergency of a change of a dispensation, surely the situation as it is today requires all I have said. But the real incentive is the knowledge that the day is far spent, the night cometh when no man can work. May the Lord find us as children of the day and not of the night.