

## **THE FALLING AND THE RISING      APRIL 6, 2008**

Once again the month of April dawns upon us with its subtle promise of newness of life and renewal of nature. Quickly diminishing are the banks of snow and streams of water run all around us. There is a freshness in the air which forces us to shake off the doldrums of winter and prepare our tools for planting gardens. The nurseries are opening with their flats of plants ready to burst forth to new life.

As you are aware, I have just come back from Australia. When you tell people in the southern hemisphere about the depth of the snow and the duration of the cold in Canada, they indicate they can not fathom how anyone can endure such a climate. Then when you tell them of our experiences of spring, they look at you in astonishment. I love to tell of what is happening now in my yard where snow banks still reign over my back yard and yet I have daffodils shooting through the ground not a foot away from the banks. What a miracle of new life! Is there any greater proof of the possibility of renewal than the Canadian experience of spring? I suspect not.

This year in April, we have already completed our celebrations of Easter. In a few short months we experienced the joy of Christmas and the agony of the crucifixion. So, in our faith community, we are post resurrection, once again reminded of the joy of our place within God's loving arms.

This is also a Sunday when we celebrate the Lord's Supper as a community of faith. This act reminds us again of God's great gift of forgiveness and our place within his family of committed people.

The two readings I chose this morning are to remind us what this relationship with God is about.

The first reading is from Luke chapter two, part of the Christmas narrative. Here we see Mary and Joseph as new parents and loyal Hebrews, bringing their new son Jesus to the temple to present him in the way all sons were presented. Sacrifices were made in thanksgiving and the son was recognized as part of the community of believers.

There was an old man named Simeon considered holy and highly respected by all the elders and the community. He had been praying for the coming of the long awaited messiah and hoped he would live to see this coming for himself.

As the senior man in the temple that day, he took the new baby in his arms to bless him. Mary and Joseph, beaming with the excitement of new parents, stood to the side to witness this key passage in the life of their son. Luke indicates that Simeon immediately felt that this child was the long awaited messiah. You note he did not shout this out but rather gave a quiet prayer of thanks to God that he, Simeon, had been here to witness the event.

People around him probably did not understand when he said: "Lord, let now your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for mine eyes have seen your salvation

which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples". So far, this was ok. Then before the Jewish religious leaders, he went on to say these unusual words: "he will be a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Right from these early days of Jesus life, Simeon glimpsed the fact that Jesus had been sent to be the messiah of all the world, not only Israel. This is a remarkable passage for it indicates God's plans for Jesus were bigger than the vision the Hebrews had for this bursting into history of the Son of God, this act they called the coming of the messiah.

Then Simeon went on to bless Jesus and to say these words to the parents about their son: "behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

Here Simeon was warning or stating what he thought was obvious about the presence of Jesus on earth. Clearly, Simeon knew that there would be no way people could be neutral about this man. This Jesus would not fade into the woodwork, nor would he be the Jesus so meek and mild as an old hymn stated. Confronting Jesus would occasion a person to face themselves in the light of Jesus' example and words.

His presence will lead to the rising and the falling of individuals, not because Jesus would consign some people to heaven and others to hell, but because coming into his presence forces one to choose between goodness and evil, forces one to face the reality of what and who we are. The good news is that Jesus offered newness of life to all people, even those we choose not to deem as worthy.

Simeon was very clear to Mary and Joseph as parents and also to the temple leaders that God was present in this man. They would be confronted by God through Jesus in a way they had never known before. Jesus came as a peacemaker, but his very teachings and example would divide people in Israel and around the globe.

Our second reading came from John's gospel. This reading is part of the famous passage about Jesus as the true vine with God as the vinedresser. We are the vines, set out to bear fruit.

Jesus says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends."

Here was Jesus speaking of the new order of things. God who had created us also loves us and always has. God is not satisfied to be all powerful, dominating our every act and thought. Rather, God has set us free to be a friend rather than a servant.

Radical words came from the mouth of this man Jesus. He did indeed force men and women by his mere presence to look at themselves, their actions, their prejudices, their sense of community. As Simeon had warned, this Jesus did and does bring about the rising and the falling of individuals as people make their own decision to follow or move away from God.

Let us keep these two passages in mind as we approach the Lord's table. We come not as servants but rather as invited guests to this feast. It is our choice to respond to God's invitation. Come and celebrate with me the wondrous works of my son Jesus. Come and experience again the love I have had for you since you were born.

Come and experience the joy of our being together, a community of faith, commitment and love.

Be not afraid, says the Lord. Come into my presence, sit at my table and enjoy the pleasure of your Lord. Come, feast with me for it will give you the strength to go out from this place and face whatever life throws at you. Know this above all else, that I am with you always, even to the end of time. Nothing can separate you from the love of God as you have known it through Christ Jesus your Lord.

Spring has come with all its promise of new life, renewed vigour and hope. Let us all go forward to experience all that spring brings. I would hope that we not be so tired that we can not allow ourselves to be full of optimism, cheer and renewal. Open our eyes, O God, that we may see anew the wonders you have wrought. May we bring the love of God and the example of Christ to our decision making, our actions and our thoughts.

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