

Presentation of Christ, February 2nd 2020.

Luke 2:22-40

This sermon text is slightly different from the audio track. This text has been reordered - Nations, Suffering, Ministry. On the audio, when originally preached, it was Suffering, Nations, Ministry. This text order, on reflection seems a better one. To explain if you have the written text and follow the sermon. Content is the same, just different order.

The wonderful words of the Nunc Dimittis have been sung within thousands of evensong services, across centuries, placed to many pieces of music. It is a set of words, that often are used within a funeral service for a Christian, a suitable set I would say. I've read them many times in such settings. Focusing on Simeon and the words he shares.

Three points : Nations, Suffering, Ministry.

Nations.



Simeon says, as he holds the 40 day old Jesus: *Jesus is a light for revelation to the nations*. The message bible puts it "A God revealing light to the non Jewish nations'. In that moment. Simeon declares. The Messiah has come. His plans - the plans of God - to bring blessing not just to Israel but to the entire world.

We have a church link with Illyricum an Albanian church planting network in Tirana - coordinated by Edi Demo. A group seeking to bring the gospel to thousands who have never heard who Jesus is. Just talk to Peter about our experiences in that nations a couple of years ago, as we visited Edi and did some teaching. Our February charitable giving goes towards helping that network in its work to bring the light of Christ within Tirana and further within Albania..



Albanian Believers



Edi, Arturo (an elder in Ekklesia Church) and their wives

When you came in, you received a map which shows the world watch list. A list created over months of work from many sources about the hardest countries it is to live out your faith.

OpenDoors RANGLIJST CHRISTENVERVOLGING 2020

Onderdrukking

Persoonlijke levensfeer
max score = 16,7

Familieverband
max score = 16,7

Gemeenschapseven
max score = 16,7

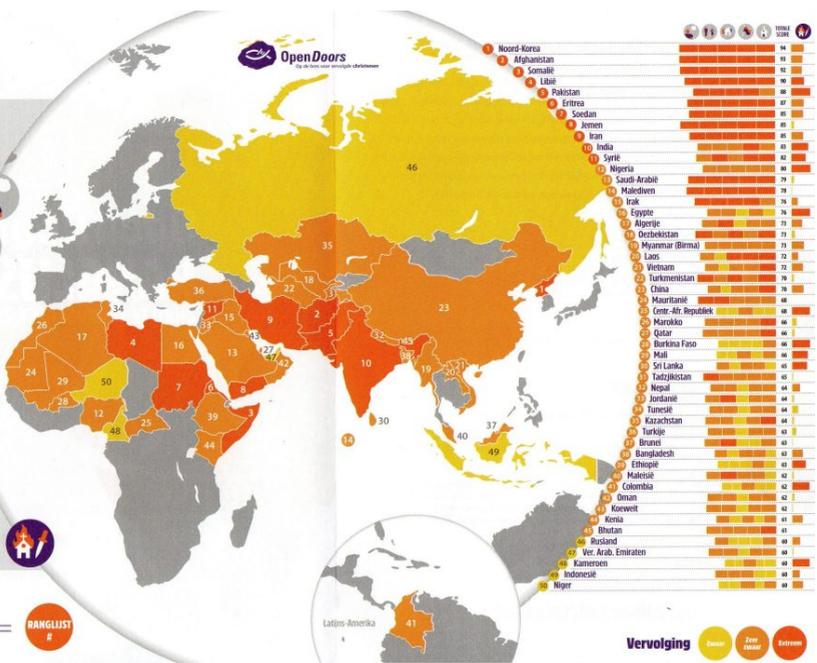
Publieke ruimte
max score = 16,7

Kerkelijk leven
max score = 16,7

Geweld

Aantal geweldsincidenten
tegen christenen en de kerk

Geweld
max score = 16,7



Simeon said - *Jesus will be a sign that will be spoken against.* And they embrace the sign of Jesus, they suffer for it. To be closely associated with Jesus brings blessings, and brings suffering. Christ is for all nations, including those 50 on that list. I don't know what your thoughts are of how persecuted Christians live. Are they just hanging in there waiting for Christ's return? Last year, I met various Christians, including, both not only, pastors and evangelists. In the pressure cooker country they were in - where church has to be registered or the police can raid it, and fine the church or you 3 or more times your annual salary; where if you have a bible or a Christian song on your phone you can be fined; where if you convert from a Muslim background, your family may cut you off forever from contract. These fellow brothers and sisters in Christ were focused upon how to get the good news of the kingdom to others. They were more than hanging in there. They were asking for strength to visit others, persevering when rejected in areas -

despite the stress and anxiety they sometimes carried around, finding creative ways to help share the gospel. So, I learned when we pray for them, it is not about them hanging in there. In a service station, we met with some because it wasn't safe to meet in their homes. I asked them which bible verses inspired them. They gave an amazing set of responses. One of them - from Matthew 24 - how they would be persecuted. It was happening as Jesus said. So they were fine with it they said. The Lord said it would happen.

Those Christians are actively seeking to bring the light of Christ - to be part of completing what Simeon prophesied - *a light for revelation to the nations*. So I wanted to invite you to join with me on a journey this coming year. To pray each week - whether once in a week, 5 minutes a day, every day, whatever, to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ - to pray through each of these 50 countries. To pray round the world. Praying as they suffer for Christ - for being closely associated with Christ; as they experience the piercing of the sword, sometimes literally, praying as they seek to bring the light of Christ to their nations. We cannot go there easily. But we can be their prayer backup - to inspire you how to pray, just read some of Paul's letters and see where he goes, how he invites his churches to pray for him as he goes, where they cannot.

We will add up each week information on each country to pray for, on our facebook, whatsapp or in our email newsletter.

Suffering.

Simeon's words hold a beautiful promise with a warning. A declaration of who Jesus is - the one who brings peace, the one who reveals God to us, the one who offers salvation, the one for whom Israel waited.

Simeon says: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign which will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Mary is warned about the pain to come through and because of her son and how others will react to him.



To be closely associated with Jesus brings blessings, and also can bring suffering. We can suffer as we have just said, because of the

faith we hold in Christ - as many believers in the world currently do.

We can also suffer because we have a family member, a close friend, someone you really care about who is antagonistic to Jesus or simply is not interested. It is painful isn't it. We long for them to see Jesus for who he is, to value a relationship with him like we do. It is a suffering which many carry. A great ache.

Others here have testimony of such painful times in the past and then a miracle happened or like a huge ship there was a turning in their friend or loved one towards Christ. Perhaps in our suffering about the distance of others from Christ we get a small glimpse of the heart of Paul when he writes in Romans:

"I have great and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." (Romans 9:2-4a).

Maybe when people reject Christ, we get a small glimpse of what Mary may have experienced 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Mary's suffering is promised. Yet you could say - this is unfair. I mean. This young lady - accepted the great call of God. She was part of one of the greatest event in history - the incarnation, Jesus was fully God, fully man. When the angel spoke to her, she could have said anything and everything and yet she said: "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38). She is obeying so much, she is giving up so much - remember it wasn't exactly popular her choice, should by how Joseph had to decide not to divorce her - so you'd think, God she has deserved a life which is easy going, full of blessings. Instead 'Her soul will be

pierced' , as she sees her son's arms and legs pierced by nails. You know I kinda believed that a number of years ago - okay God if I faithfully follow you, then things should go well nearly always. And you know when things didn't go well, when painful things happened that I was swept up in, or were beyond my control, I realised it was affecting my relationship with God. I was blaming God for the bad stuff / the battles. But while he promised blessings, he promised battles and struggles, he promised I could be persecuted for following his son. Somehow I had bought into, bad things should not happen to me if I faithfully follow the Lord. But I kind of forgotten both Mary's example and also our Lord - the one who truly lived the life God desired, and yet we remember all he went through - well, we all know.

But can I add. *Mary knows*. She knew that particular suffering would come. Simeon's words are a prophecy. Did this promise strengthen her? She was a lady who treasured up things in her heart we read. When the crucifixion did come, when she heard about her son being arrested, when she went to the hill and saw him hanging there, did she bring this prophecy out of her treasures of her heart, as she stood there, did she remember an old man holding Jesus in the temple not so far from where she stood, and his prophecy about him and her. *He said a sword would pierce her soul*. As she saw those events, as she brought this prophecy out of the treasures in her heart, she would have known God still reigned, he was still faithful, good. She would have stood on the promises of who God is and what he said he would do. We do the same in our suffering. We hold fast to the promises and character of God. We are not cut off from his love, and he is still as much with us as he was when things were going so well. He remains faithful, he reigns, he is good. As Brother Andrew when he visited Corrie Ten Boom in her new home in Haarlem, he looked at everything she had, and he said ' Corrie, God is good to you.' Brother Andrew later

remembered, Corrie said quickly, forcefully, 'God was also good when my sister Betsie died. God is always good.'

About 5 1/2 years ago, my grandmother - died aged 94. I was in Friesland, in Gorredijk, with Jolanda and the kids when I heard. I went for a walk to think about it and her - she was a lovely lady who gave me many fond memories, with a quiet sold Christian faith. I ended up in an industrial area. I remember looking through the gates of this old factory which had been closed down, it looked like as if, people had just stopped work one day, locked the gates and walked off. And in the car park a for sale sign. And you know, God's Spirit really spoke to me through this place. I looked at it. And it looked, no hope, gone. People driving by would say 'nothing to see here' the sign said - there is *potential* there, in fact there *is hope, life can come*. I remember very much what Paul said - in 1 Thessalonians 4 'we do not grieve like the rest of people who have no hope. We believe'.

We grieve but with hope. I realised that to many people, they would look at Granny's coffin, or her body when they would visit her at her home, when she is brought back home the day before the service. And say - there is nothing to see here. No life. No hope. But in fact, like that sign in the car park - for sale, there is life, hope, potential, it spoke to those who wanted to see - I would look at Granny and I remember the promises of God - of resurrection, of a new body that will not die, that this is the end of the first chapter, there is still many chapters to come, as CS Lewis says. And those insights, which led me to the promises of God, reminded me to *grieve with hope*. A simple story but as suffering comes, as it did to Mary, did she bring out of her treasure chest what she knew about God and the words by Simeon, did that give her strength, hope, even when she was numb with what she heard, saw, knew had taken place to her son...

Ministry.

Today we will commission two new people - Anneke and Angela - onto our prayer ministry team. What we see in our gospel points to me some ideas of prayer ministry and how Simeon is a model.

Mary and Joseph when they came into God's house - to the temple - they sought to bring an offering. Prayer ministry is a beautiful ministry. *It is a* place where people can come and bring deep personal needs.

But consider Mary and Joseph. They come and bring offering. As customary in the law. It is okay to come to a prayer team, to give thanks, to let the team rejoice with you.. Oh the joy for a team of having people come and like the story of the 10 lepers and the one who comes back and say "I want to give thanks"! It is wonderful if people, who have received prayer ministry, are able to return and share with the team how those prayers have been answered and give thanks.

Joseph and Mary bring an offering to God. We offer ourselves before the Lord. Prayer Ministry is a place to come and make that commitment before the Lord with others. We can make a commitment in our head, but you know once you tell others, it is a whole different thing. This can be a place to bring that offering - what are you offering to the Lord in service of him - share it with the team and ask them to pray you will be faithful in what you offer to do.

But prayer ministry is a safe place to bring the pain of a loved one rejecting Christ, a place to bring a struggle in understanding why life is so hard at the moment though I faithfully follow Jesus, a place to bring deep suffering asking afresh for God's strength to hold onto his promises and who he is, a place to bring our struggles

as we feel we are being persecuted for being a Christian. We can of course do this praying alone. Yes. These prayer ministers - God doesn't listen to their prayers anymore than yours. However, at times, to pray with people, to share with people, is like the paralysed man - brought to Jesus as they carried him on his mat - he couldn't make it; at times we need others to bring our situation to the Lord.



Sculpture of Moses, with Aaron and Hur (Exodus 17,v8-15), Friedenskirche (Potsdam)

It is like Moses and his arms needed help to be lifted high, they can lift your hands high in prayer as you are just tired. The only time Moses needed those arms lifted up - yet he needed it on that day because of the demands on it. So it is a place to bring needs, struggles.

Simeon is a man led by the Spirit. Mary and Joseph had a reason for being there. Yet the Lord had an additional thing in mind. Our prayer ministry team when you come and share, they pray with you, for you, they will listen to you and what you share. But they also want to be sensitive if the Spirit of the Lord seeks to pass on something that can be strengthening, upbuilding, encouraging, comforting. It could be a scripture, it could be an image or vision, it could be they feel prompted to tell part of their testimony. The team are not there to counsel people but to pray with and for, and listen to the Spirit and then to share it in a gentle way. We to be open to God's Spirit to break in, to speak, to minister in the prayer ministry. For the Prayer Ministry to be led by the Spirit, as Simeon is a man led that day in the temple courts.

Simeon and his words. Nations. Suffering. Ministry.

Christ a light of revelation to *the nations* - as Albania network and also what many persecuted believers, despite their suffering at various levels for Christ, seek to do.

Suffering comes to those closely associated with Jesus - across our world but also within our own lives

But our strength, in the promises of God and who He is.

Ministry. A place to bring the suffering and struggles we face. But also to bring thanksgivings, and commitments we want to place

before the Lord. And this ministry we seek to be Spirit led, as
Simeon was that historic day.

Shall we pray.