

Dismiss Us

Luke 2:22—32 (v. 29—32)

Introduction

A Biblical canticle is a song in the Bible other than a Psalm. The four most familiar canticles in the church are all found in the first two chapters of **Luke**. The Magnificat: Mary's song of praise when visiting Elizabeth (**Luke 1:46—45**), the Benedictus, Zechariah's Song of prophecy at John's birth (**Luke 1:67—79**), the Gloria in Excelsis: the angels' song of praise at Jesus' birth (**Luke 2:14**), and the Nunc Dimittis: Simeon's song of praise when he saw and held the baby Jesus (**Luke 2:29—32**). Today, as we celebrate the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord, we read the Nunc Dimittis in our Gospel lesson.

Meaning and Occasion – v. 22—24

Nunc Dimittis is Latin for “now dismiss” and are the first two words in the Latin translation of the song. That's how Biblical canticles get their names. Mary and Joseph have come to the temple for Mary's purification after childbirth, according to the Law. The Law says *she shall bring ... a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering (Leviticus 12:6). [But] if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering (v. 8)*. They brought *a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (v. 24)*, since they could not afford the lamb for the burnt offering.

Who Was Simeon? – v. 25

Of course, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were not yet known as the “Holy Family.” They were poor Israelite citizens with no notoriety or class. They went virtually ignored by people. If the angels hadn't come to them, even the shepherds would have missed His nativity. They were definitely flying under the radar. But Simeon noticed them. Who was this Simeon? According to Johannes Brenz, Simeon was an old man, *a citizen of Jerusalem, famous neither for his riches, his dignity, nor his office (An Ecclesiastical Exposition Upon Saint Luke 2)*. Just like Mary and Joseph, Simeon was an unknown, an insignificant nobody, as far as society was concerned. However, he was *righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him (v. 25)*.

Why Did He Sing This Song? – v. 26—27

The Lord had revealed to Simeon, and he believed it, that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. He knows the time is getting close. As he ages, he can feel his body weaken. With all the aches and pains that come with old age, he can hardly wait to see the Messiah and be free to die. Simeon is imprisoned in his body and can only find release through the Messiah, the Lord's Anointed. When he sees the baby Jesus and holds Him in his arms, the Spirit of God reveals to him that this is the One for whom he has been waiting, and he bursts into this joyful song of praise. He can finally die in peace. Peace, not just because he has seen the Messiah, but that Salvation has come to his beloved Israel. And he recognizes that this salvation is for all nations, not just Israel. Christ is a *light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to [God's] people, Israel (v. 32)*. His long wait is over at last!

How Do We Use It?

So, how do we use the Nunc Dimittis in worship services? What does it mean when we sing it?

At the Close of Communion

The Nunc Dimittis is most familiar to us as the post-Communion canticle. We sing it right after receiving the body and blood of our Lord. Simeon held the Baby Jesus, saw the salvation of Israel, and could be released. We have received the body and blood of our Lord, salvation for our souls, and can be released. This is not just dismissing us from the Communion service to go into the world as witnesses for Christ, but since we have received forgiveness of sins, we are now free to be released from this life.

At the Close of Day

We also sing it right before the Benediction in the Compline, the prayer office at the close of the day. We are trusting God to give us a peaceful night's sleep. We are praying that God would *guard us sleeping that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace* (**LSB p. 258**).

At the Close of the Funeral Service

And we use it in the funeral service. Just before the Closing Collect, the pastor takes his place at the head of the casket and says: *"I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord. "He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die"* (**John 11:25—26**). The congregation responds with the Nunc Dimittis (**LSB, p. 281**). This powerful affirmation of our life in Christ is key to the Christian funeral service. Our salvation and life are only in Jesus Christ. As Martin Luther said: *If you want death to be a peaceful sleep, you have to have a clear conscience, and Moses and his Law must be far away* (**A Sermon for February 2, 1526**).

What Does It Mean?

The Nunc Dimittis reminds us that our salvation is in Christ and in Him alone. And it's only because of that forgiveness and salvation that He can dismiss us from the Communion service into the world. And only that forgiveness and salvation can give us a restful sleep. And only that forgiveness and salvation give us the assurance that we can have a peaceful death, because we know that, in Christ, we will live forever with God in heaven.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
