

# AN IGNATIAN MEDITATION ON THE SONG OF SIMEON

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*and delivered by him as an Homily on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord  
at Saint Gregory the Great Church, Beverly Farms Massachusetts  
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**I**T WAS A RESTLESS night. That has not been the pattern of my sleep in these days: my nightly rests are long and my sleep deep, as if my old age were preparing me for the permanent sleep of death. In a way that has secretly been my desire...to fall asleep and not awake. This strange wish is not shaped by personal unhappiness: the Lord God, blessed be his Name!, has graced me not only with health and length of years – I have seen my children’s children’s children – but with richness of life as a priest in his holy temple. No: I am tired of the horrific evil and brutality that afflicts our land; I wish at last to die and see the messianic kingdom of heaven where, as the prophet says, *God will swallow up death, and wipe away tears from all faces; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

Yesterday was an especially distressing day of confrontation with the anguish and injustice of Zion’s captivity. My temple duties took me to the nearby town of Bethlehem; the shepherds of that area provide the sheep for the daily sacrifices of the temple. I was in the vale below the village inspecting new-born lambs to ensure they were spotless and unblemished, as the Law of Moses requires, when an horrific shriek echoed down the limestone hills. In a minute children and women were running down the paths, shouting *Herod’s soldiers are raiding homes, seeking all new-born male children; one they found, and pierced its little body through with a spear!* The wailing from above increased; and once again the prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled: *Rachel weeps for her children and she cannot be consoled.*

O God, how often must we behold the slaughter of our children? From Ramses, to Nebuchadnezzar, to Antiochus, to Herod, tears and blood have soaked into this desert soil. O God of our fathers, how long? Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

Yes; it was that scream which haunted me all night.

I hurriedly returned the few miles to Jerusalem only to be met by another spectacle of terror. There, beyond the north corner of the city wall, crosses were etched against the horizon on the hill of Golgotha: fresh sacrifices to the Roman Imperial eagle god, drunk on the blood of Jewish youth. I bent my path up the steep hill of death. My life is to pray over the blood offerings of the temple; I must do the same over these, unappointed, sacrifices.

There were three executions that day; I looked into their young but anguished faces. These tortured young men were Zealots, inspired by the fire of our Maccabæan forefathers. Our Priestly class vehemently opposes their foolish terrorism – for their tactical assassinations have only brought greater oppression to Judea. But I prayed, beneath their dripping blood, that their deaths would not be barren of meaning.

O God of our fathers, how long? Lord, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

Yes; it was those faces which haunted me all night.

I rose. Today the early sacrifices were my assignment. As I washed and vested, my lips uttered all the morning prayers, but my mind was still engrossed in yesterday's experiences. Robed, I walked from my chambers into the outer precincts of the temple, the Court of Women. It was still empty, but for Anna – sleeping, as she has for as long as I can remember, by the pillar before the Altar of Incense. Hurrying by, I noticed she was in fact not asleep but already at her prayers, her face turned obsequiously to the temple floor: it was wet with her tears.

I was about to enter the Inner Sanctuary when a whisper came from behind another pillar. An old man stretched forth his arm; he held two pigeons. Beside him was a very young girl clutching a bundle to her bosom, as if hiding it. The man whispered: *Our son; it is for his purchase and my wife's purification. He has opened her womb: he belongs to God and it is now forty days, the time of his redemption. We present him to the Lord God, blessed be his Name!*

I began to protest that the people's sacrifices were not received until mid-day; but he begged me, saying urgently: *The child's life is in danger: we are fleeing, to Egypt.*

I relented and took the baby from his mother. She spoke: *I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord...*Eve's ancient words, prayed once again.

I carried the child up the stairs and through the Court of Men to the door of the Inner Sanctuary. At the altar I unwrapped the babe and lay him on its cold stone,

then tied the birds to the altar's right horn. And there, beside the tiny body of the boy, I slit the throats of the white birds: the blood flowed around the child and with it I anointed his flesh.

I lifted his tiny naked body before the veil of the Holy of Holies: *Blessed art thou, Lord God of our fathers through whom this new life is given and the future opened! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessed is the blood which purchases the life of the first-born!*

No sooner had I prayed than a wind blew, stirring the Curtain of the temple. The small body elevated in my hands convulsed in a brief spasm.

A strange sense gripped me – a sense I have come to know as the Spirit of God. I bundled the child up again and looked at him. The sense became stronger. I began to move back out from the Sanctuary: the weight of the Spirit became stronger yet...this was strange. As I emerged from the Inner Sanctuary the weight of God's Spirit felled me, bringing me to my knees in the outer court. The couple, seeing me struggling, ran to my side.

*I am well; it is the Spirit...*

I have experienced intimations of God's glory on occasion...but there was only one other occasion of such intensity. Lord, could this be...?

Yes; God spoke to me once...I was a young Priest and could hardly believe it: God's voice, with this same heaviness of Presence – just that once, so long ago. God spoke, audibly; and he spoke a promise: A promise that I would see the Promise of Israel; the face of the Anointed One.

Could this be... There, on my knees, I again looked into the eyes of this infant: could this be...the Lord's Messiah?

The Spirit burst forth from within me now, like a deep pressure which has been blocked for ages and ages; like a fountain of praise breaking forth to the heavens:

**LORD, NOW LETTEST THOU THY SERVANT DEPART IN PEACE, ACCORDING TO THY WORD:  
FOR MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THY SALVATION,  
WHICH THOU HAST PREPARED BEFORE THE FACE OF ALL PEOPLE:  
TO BE A LIGHT TO ENLIGHTEN THE GENTILES,  
AND TO BE THE GLORY OF THY PEOPLE [SRÆL!**

The parents took the child from my trembling hands and hurried away.