

The Reception of the Lord in the Temple (Candlemas) Part 1 (Metropolitan Nikodemos (Vallindras) of Patras)

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With great emotion, Symeon the righteous holds the divine infant in his arms. His heart is inundated with joy. His gaze is fixed upon the heavens and his lips move devoutly, in the fervent prayer which has risen to his mouth at that blessed moment: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart...”. This thrice-blessed elder then turns to Our Most Holy Lady, to tell her words of great moment. With the air of a prophet illumined by the spirit of God revealing the will of the Most High, he says, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign gainsaid”.



Truly prophetic words, which Our Lady hears, not merely with emotion but with awe. Since they foretell dire and distressing events, continuing as they do with confirmation that “a sword will pierce through your own soul also”, that is, that your own maternal heart will have a two-edged sword thrust into it. These final words of the prophecy refer to the Lord’s Passion, when His mother’s heart would

be torn. The earlier prophetic words, however, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign gainsaid” had and have their application in every era.

1. “A sign gainsaid”. When the Son of God became incarnate and came into the world, this became the most serious sign of the human propensity for contradiction. His personality and teaching stood out like a bright column, certainly attracting the attention of all, and inviting them to take up a position concerning them. People are always divided into two camps, depending on the attitude they take to Christ. The whole history of humankind turns upon the axis which is Christ. The most profound meaning of the historical events of any and every age is not- as some would have us believe- the concatenation of material (especially economic) factors, but is rather the attitude that every nation takes towards Christ and His Law.

This is the “sign gainsaid”. Some accept Him; others deny Him. Some rally to His flag, loyal soldiers of His kingdom; others attack the ideals which He wrote with the blood of His sacrifice. And, through a variety of events, the course of history after Christ demonstrates the movement and progress which follow the curve of Christianity or not in the life of individuals and societies. This is really so. Individuals and families who accept Him and conform to His will have a tendency to progress towards “repose”, that is they enjoy a felicitous path, despite any trials that may befall them.

On the other hand, those who take a negative attitude and refuse to be obedient to His divine will, tread a path that leads towards “a fall”, that is, they bring down a destructive collapse upon themselves: “in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (*Rom.* 3, 16-17). As the prophet said many centuries ago: “those who separate themselves from God will be lost” (*Psa.* 72, 27). And whole societies are led “to a rising” or “to a fall” depending on whether a Christian or anti-Christian spirit informs them. There is also a cultural rise or fall, commensurate with the dominant climate and trends. Where there is the Christian spirit, culture is promoted; without it, society quickly descends towards its decline and twilight. The prophecy that Our Lord Jesus Christ “is set for the fall and rising of many... and for a sign gainsaid” is incontrovertible.

2. From the time of the Lord’s life on earth, this dilemma was put before people, and His presence and teaching were presented as a “sign gainsaid”, in a dual sense. In the first place, many people wondered: “For who is he?” (*Mk.* 4, 41). In order to hear what public opinion was saying about Him, did the Lord not ask His disciples: “Who do people say I am?” (*Matth.* 16, 13). And on the part of the

disciples, the answer came: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets". Christ asks again: "Who do you say that I am?". And in the name of all the disciples, Peter expresses the real view of Christ and triumphantly confesses: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (ibid.14-16). Since then, everyone who thinks seriously has faced this problem: "For who is he?". Who is He Who appears in divine form, as a most holy personality and as a teacher of the most sublime truths?

Some bow down before His holy personality and reverently submit to His divine will. Both the wise of this world and the simple folk. Under His flag and in accordance with His Gospel, everyone who confesses faith in Him and devotion to Him meets with others of like mind and they worship His divinity. Others, however, have their reservations. They consider Him to be merely a wonderful personality, but have their doubts as regards His divinity.

But the Lord is not a "sign gainsaid" merely on the level of faith, but also on the ethical plane. This is the main reason why the crowds of people were split regarding Him (*Jn. 7, 43*). Because the Lord did not present Himself simply as a teacher, but He also demanded that our lives should conform to His teaching. So people were divided. Some, who realized that this teaching was the most sublime moral teaching, accepted it and complied with it; others, however, repeated: "these are hard words. Who is able to hear them?" (*Jn. 6, 60*). In other words, the demands of this teaching are harsh and who can hear them and apply them? So they turned their backs and abandoned the teaching of the Lord. At the same time, others who were more prudent and of a more sincere disposition, have declared throughout the centuries: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (ibid. 68).

3. But while the Lord, in this manner, is presented as a "sign gainsaid" and "is set for the fall and rising of many", depending on the attitude of each person, it remains a reality beyond all doubt that each one of us, will have to take a stand, once and for all, either for or against Christ. A lot of people imagine that it is possible to adopt an indifferent attitude, neither giving the Christian faith a warm welcome nor being hostile towards it. This is self-deception. Because the Lord said that "those who are not with me are against me" (*Matth. 12, 30*). This so-called neutrality, which even in international affairs gives the impression of refusal and unwillingness to engage in common action and aid, is not a possibility in our relations with the Lord. Because those who wish to appear indifferent and neutral, are, in reality, opposed.

They are also guilty of being allies of evil, and are to be counted as belonging to

the party that denies Christ and His will. Unfortunately, the greater part of the human race is neither hot nor cold. They're lukewarm. And the Lord says that if you put something lukewarm into your mouth, it will make you sick (a phrase from the Revelation of the Lord, 3, 16), in order to tell us that He wants us to be fervent and devoted towards Him, with a real effort and desire to apply His teaching in our lives. If we are lukewarm, He does not consider that we are with Him. On the contrary, He holds that those who are lukewarm are, in reality, cold and allied to evil.

These are views, worthy of great attention, which arise from the prophecy of the righteous Symeon, spoken at the Reception of The Lord, which we celebrate today. May these thoughts be a start for each of us to recognize the attitude we have taken, or will take, as regards the Lord. And may this knowledge bring us to the firm decision to remain citizens and heirs of the Kingdom of God, unto the ages.

(†) Metropolitan Nikodemos (Vallindras) of Patras, Εόρτια Μηνύματα, published by Apostoliki Diakonia

There are a number of names for this feast in the West, including the Purification of the Virgin and the Presentation of Christ. The Greek name has a different emphasis. Of course, the occasion was the “churcing” of the Mother of God, and, also the presentation of the new-born child. But the Greek word *Υπαπαντή*, means “an official welcome”. The sense is that Symeon goes out to meet the Lord and His mother, in a way that he would not have done otherwise, because someone very special is arriving. This is not to say that the other names are “wrong”, simply that the Greek adds another dimension, which may be of interest. WJL.