

In September Prince Andrew, our Queen's son, was mistaken for an intruder by armed police as he walked in the gardens of Buckingham Palace. This gave the British press a field day, with claims he was even told to "hit the ground". And all kinds of jokes about the police not recognising the Sovereign's son they were responsible to guard! This incident was used as the lead-off to the question "What do we mean by 'recognise' anyway?" in a recent article in Financial World. It was one of their frequent looks at the vexing issue of recognition and identity, on which businesses and governments are spending billions of dollars to try to get right.

St. John's Gospel also laments that when the *Prince of Peace* came, "the world did not recognise Him." Thankfully, our Scripture reading for today gives us another view on recognition and identification – which has been a core issue for the Christian long before digitalisation of all our data made this such a frenzied concern for everyone else. In fact it was pivotal throughout the Bible; and that matter of whether God is recognised or not, as well as the corollary of how do you identify those who truly "recognise" Him, is still central today, regrettably. Let us therefore now hear and heed the Word of God as found in Luke 2: 25 – 32:

25 Now there was a man named Simeon who lived in Jerusalem. He was a righteous man and very devout. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he eagerly expected the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. 26 The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, 30 I have seen the Savior 31 you have given to all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

Thanks be to God for His holy Word.

I was drawn to think of this familiar and profound story a couple of months ago while looking in the Old Testament at those recurring cycles of the Israelites' tendency to forget God, especially after long periods of prosperity and peace. We see that there would be a particular time they clearly and passionately *recognise* God, recognise His nature in beautiful prose that still speaks so eloquently of God's omnipotent presence, power, righteousness and love; recognise Him as their Lord, their King, and, yes, as the Saviour they have called on repeatedly as the only one able to save them from all kinds of tragic situations. At such a high point, they have an identity – and they are proud of it, "we are the people who follow the one true Jehovah God" they proclaim to their pagan neighbours. They *recognise* their God, and they in turn *are identified* with Him.

Then after enjoying wonderful fullness of life for a spell, they start to lose their identity, but not by *someone else* hacking it. They would fall from their pinnacles because of their *own* actions. The only stealing was to the extent we still use the term when we let things like temptation, lethargy, rebellion, stubbornness, or the lack of faith that identifies us as having Abraham's spiritual DNA, steal what, with hindsight, turns out to have been a good life.

The downhill move would begin when they started forgetting who was God, when they moved their focus from Him, when they ignored God's nature and the way He created us to live. For in the end righteousness, that is, living right and just, must prevail; therefore unrighteous living leads, sooner or later, to social breakdown; and in the process many get hurt badly, including the proverbial innocent. And the hurt comes in many forms.

At times this failure to recognise God and His unique features literally took the form whereby they thought they could mix Him in amongst pagan gods, idols, and worship everything. Often it was not so literal, instead they were doing other things that had the same effect of causing the Image of God in their minds to become blurred, confused and eventually fade, so that they started loving, listening to and following other things and people instead. That was the main cause at the time of Jesus's birth, why the world did not recognise Him, why, as St. John also adds, "even His own people" rejected Him and why when they later cried out for the Romans to crucify Him they could shout "we have no king but Caesar".

And so it continues to be now with so large a proportion of the world and even so many of "His own people". For, though we might not melt down our jewellery to make a golden calf, even those of us who list ourselves as Christian too often do not *know* the Prince of Peace as we should, or the fullness of life that word "peace" means. Consequently, we do not recognise the uniqueness of His features, and often join in the shout for Him to lift His arms and halt, not remembering that there are no parts of the grounds of life that are off limits to Him. He does not surrender in any corner of His world. It's the other way around: the only price of admission in to the grounds of *God's* Kingdom, for anyone, is surrender *to* Him.

But whatever led the Israelites to one of their downward phases, that left no time for God or His call to a caring life, the result was the same. As God laments in Jeremiah, "My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the Spring of Living Water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." For that is what happens when we start believing we can be our own god. Sooner or later, we realise our cisterns are empty; life is dry, parched, empty, and whatever we had in those self-made reservoirs no longer helps us, whether it was a golden calf or just the "jewellery" the "bling" as we say now, of life.

"What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves," God continues in anguish in Jeremiah. He adds that they had gone from "sound and reliable stock" to "a corrupt, wild vine" "My people do not know the *requirements* of the Lord. How Can you say, we are wise? Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what *kind* of wisdom do they *have*?" There we see it again. They no longer recognised *God*, they were no longer familiar with His requirements, and as a result they had lost also *their* identity.

And Jeremiah 2 noted how these cycles inevitably ended. "They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in *trouble* they say, 'Come and *save* us!' The question for us this Christmas is, which cycle are we in?"

Undoubtedly we have many telling us that we need to reject the word of the Lord, and who scoff at the supernatural, of God becoming flesh in His ultimate response to the repeated cries of His people to "Come and save us!" Despite the great twenty-first Century learning they evoke for their arguments, they seem blissfully unaware that throughout history people have put forward these same arguments in order to salve their consciences. God has heard it all before. As Jeremiah also records, "This is what the Lord says: "Do not let the wise boast in *their* wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast *in this alone*: that they *truly know me* and understand that I am the Lord who demonstrates unfailing *love* and who brings *justice* and *righteousness* to the earth, and that I *delight* in these things."

So, at this Christmas let us not be swayed by the sceptics who boast in their own wisdom. Let us look to the dawning of a new year with hope, despite all the darkness around us. For amidst the rebellion and suffering of Jeremiah's time there *was* the faithful remnant of whom God could say, "But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, *and they never stop producing fruit.*"

And so it was at the time of the birth of Jesus, when the world "did not recognise Him". Yet there were some who *did* recognise Him, *did* receive Him. Some like the rich and wise Magi, some like the poor and humble shepherds. And those like Simeon from our Scripture today, a "righteous and devout" man, like the people of Psalm 1 who "delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night." "Those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join with mockers." The people who did as God had also said in Jeremiah, "if you seek me *wholeheartedly* " with all your heart " you *will* find me."

Let us therefore rejoice as we look forward to the year ahead. For we too can still say like Simeon, "my eyes have seen Your Salvation". Unlike the "world" whose eyes have lost focus looking for something else, we who put our faith in Him *can* recognise the Prince of Peace, when we meditate devoutly on His unique features, which do not change, and let Him engrave them on our hearts and *in our living*: kindness, righteousness, humility, justice and mercy. "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men." Amen