



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Holy Family-Year B-December 27th 2020

Readings: Genesis 15: 1-6, 21: 1-3, Psalm 104, Hebrews 11: 8, 11-12. 17-19, Luke 2: 22-40

Sometimes a phrase or an idea just catches the zeitgeist, expresses something with astonishing accuracy and embeds itself in the language.

In 2007 a film was released starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. It was the story of two old and mortally ill men, from very different backgrounds, meeting in the terminal ward and pooling ideas on what they would really like to do before they die.

It's called 'The Bucket List' – what they really want to do before they kick it.

The film sparked a rash of book and spin offs – 1000 things to do before you die

1000 movies you must see before you die – at my current rate I would need to live to about 250 to achieve this.

100 great churches to see

100 top restaurants to dine

100 top beaches to surf etc etc

The list goes on. It is, of course, like the movie, a peculiar indulgence of the fantasy of Western culture – hence, I guess, it's appeal.

Death gives you a decent amount of warning.

During its approach you feel well enough to do all these things.

You have the financial comfort to be able to indulge yourself - and so on.

Life, of course, and death are not like that. But I detect something of the Bucket List indulgence in the annual raft of Christmas letters from comfortably retired old friends in which we are usually treated to a long list of splendid holidays they have been on. (This year we got a long list of holidays they were intending to go on had not the plague's grim reaper so inconveniently intervened in their travel arrangements.)

What is interesting in the Bucket List is the prevalence of material indulgence BUT underneath, in the movie at least, it masks a deeper need for the inner journey of reconciliation – with, in the case of the two old men, estranged family. It is, cheerfully and deliberately, inextricably bound into a spiritual metaphor.

The material indulgence continues to the not so bitter end but greater matters obtain. Nonetheless the concept does underline my regular claim that people spend more time planning their holidays than they do preparing for their final journey.

In today's Gospel we encounter the man with the ultimate bucket list – Simeon. In our readings we anticipate the great and beautiful feast of Candlemas, the end of the ancient Christmas season, before Christmas has even begun.

The Holy Family come to the Temple to present the Christ child. The Lord comes to His Temple. And here they are dramatically encountered by an old man, Simeon. (According to the Protoevangelium of James, the successor in the Temple priesthood to the murdered father of John the Baptist.)

His intervention is startling. The family, having made the offering of the poor, suddenly find this Holy Spirit inspired old man encountering them and blowing the cover on their anonymity.

Uninvited he takes the Christ child in his arms and blessed God. His specific and opening statement, what we call now the NUNC DIMITTIS and which we pray at vespers, is the most famous 'bucket list' in history.

Far from planning a party, a pilgrimage or a holyday, or organising a series of distractions from the imminence of his mortality, Simeon embraces the reality.

Simeon's 'bucket list' is the promise by God that he will see the Messiah before he dies. He is not only content to die with this, now tangible, promise in his arms, indeed he welcomes death. His life is complete. He can depart in peace. All is completed. All is resolved. The salvation of the people has arrived. His duties and cares for his people and prayers for the liberation of his nation are now all subsumed in this final beautiful action of God and His amazing mercy.

This beautiful account poses the question to all of us, living, as human beings all do, in the shadow of death. What does our bucket list look like?

Is it to see the Taj Mahal by moonlight? Dine at the Ritz one last time? Win the Euro lottery and endow our favourite causes? Ride in the victory parade of our favourite football team? See our family divisions healed and reconciled?

Or is it, with Simeon, to hold the Christ child in our arms and welcome death as our translation to the eternal present and presence of God, knowing salvation has come to the world for those who will receive it?

For Catholics that moment is offered at every Mass. We come to the Temple to receive the Saviour of the world from Mary's arms and hold him to our hearts. We go out to proclaim Him to the world and face death without fear and in the knowledge that salvation has come to His people.

