



“A SWORD WILL  
PIERCE YOUR OWN  
SOUL, TOO”



THE FIRST SORROW



Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. . . . And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” (Lk 2:27–28, 33–35)



The temple, a sacred space, a place filled with God’s presence and, in this scene, it is meant to be a place of joy. The reason behind this story was a common occurrence, proud parents bringing their first-born son to be presented to God as the Mosaic Law required. Once the blessing was given and the rituals completed, the family would return home to celebrate the new life with which

they had been blessed. It is indeed a time of great joy—under usual circumstances. Mary’s experience on this day, however, moves in a different direction. She is confronted with an ominous prophecy and a promise of future pain, indicating decisions that will have to be made in the years ahead.

An elder among the people, a person of insight, a “righteous and devout” man, Simeon by name, greets the parents as they enter the temple and takes the child in his arms. He praises God and prophesies that this child is indeed the “salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples” (Lk 2:30–31). After the customary blessing of the parents, Simeon addresses Mary in words that are less than comforting. He refers to her son as “a sign that will be opposed,” and he tells her that “a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” What began as a moment of joy has now changed into a time of confusion and concern.

### The Sword

In the fourteenth chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet is reprimanding those who have been unfaithful to God through idolatry. He insists that God’s judgments upon them will be particularly severe because all have succumbed to the seductions of idolatry’s empty promises. In describing one of those judgments through the prophet,

God says, “If I bring a sword upon that land and say, ‘Let a sword pass through the land,’ and I cut off human beings and animals from it; though these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord God . . . they alone would be saved” (14:17–18). The “three men” being referred to are Noah, Daniel, and Job as outstanding examples of the integrity and fidelity necessary to maintain an intimate relationship with God even in the face of tempting alternatives. The sword that strikes here is the sword of distinction separating those who are faithful from those who are not. This is the sword to which Simeon refers.

Jesus’ own life and mission will be marked by this sword. In describing his presence and activity, he is uncompromising: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Simeon has prophesied the very sign that Jesus’ life and mission will be. Jesus is God’s own word, and that word “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). This same sword slices through Mary’s heart as Jesus’ future is unveiled on this day in the temple. It will slice again as that future unfolds in the coming years.

Mary must choose to embrace this sword even as she will be called to embrace Jesus’ message and mission with all the turbulence they will inevitably bring. This choice

must be her own because neither family ties nor familiarity with Jesus are sure guarantees for faith. Mary is unquestionably a woman of integrity, a model of fidelity. Her response to the Annunciation had already heralded a path that would draw her progressively deeper into the Paschal Mystery. This scene at the temple is but one point along the way that God is leading her.

### The Challenge

Simeon's prophecy gives Mary a glimpse into the meaning of Jesus' life. That same prophecy reveals to us the meaning of life for all those who are committed to the spiritual life, for living and working and loving as Jesus did. Such a commitment situates us at the cutting edge of life and death, truth and falsehood, decisiveness and passivity, passion and apathy. With Mary, our soul and spirit and self-image will be pierced by our relationship with Jesus, revealing either the integrity or inconsistency between what we profess to be and what we actually do.

Like Mary we too must choose to embrace what God asks of us; we must choose to embrace Jesus' example for our own lives. The choice must be made and it must be a personal decision because faith and fidelity cannot be assumed and they surely cannot be feigned, at least not for very long. We cannot know in advance the precise pathways along which our spiritual lives will take us. This is

a blessing, whether or not we perceive it as such, because we might be tempted to customize and control the configuration of those pathways, not allowing much room for God’s presence and activity. If we are willing to follow the pathways that God opens before us, then, like Mary, we will encounter the sword of distinction.

The temple is a place of offering, a place for dedicating our lives to God. This first of Mary’s sorrows proposes a challenge for our spiritual lives: we must offer to God that which is most valuable to us. Mary’s example demonstrates a two-fold offering. She offered her entire life to God at the Annunciation. Now she offers the life of her son. This complete offering of self and of all that is most valuable constitutes the meaning of the Christian life and the means for rooting personal identity in Jesus and in his teaching. Such an offering must be evident in the lives of all those who profess to be his followers.

In our spiritual lives, we assign meaning to events and experiences and even objects. This is a natural and necessary process that affords us a way of prioritizing the materials, moments, and memories that fill our lives. And this same process provides us with a means for determining and distinguishing between what is prominent and permanent for our continued spiritual development, and what is peripheral and passing. Meaning shapes our identity for the present and for the future. When something has value and meaning for the way we choose to live, we

create and maintain space and time and energy for it. Because we identify with it in some way, we sense that our lives would be less full without it. Over time, others recognize us, at least in part, by our identification with the realities that have meaning in our lives.

Offering what is most valuable assumes that we know the meaning of what we offer. If that offering is to be marked by integrity and sincerity, then it must come from our heart; it must be part of the very soil in which our heart is planted. Our faith calls us to situate God at the foundation of all that has meaning in our lives; we must root our identity in God alone. God must be the soil in which we grow.

We are created in God's image and likeness; God is the core and completion of our identity. We thus have the capacity for God. Whenever we assign value and meaning to realities that are marginal and momentary, we distort our vision of who and what we are as creatures of a loving God. Jesus reminds us, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Lk 12:34). We must take care, then, where we settle our heart, where we allow it to take root, so its treasure will be truly worthy of the God who created us, whose image and likeness we bear.

### M a r y ’ s E x a m p l e

The first of Mary’s sorrows has led her to the temple, into the presence of God. Her example here teaches us that only from our deepest self, from our heart, can we offer to God what is most valuable. All else is secondary. She teaches us that the offering must be made, even when the consequences might be unpleasant or altogether unknown. We must offer our lives as Mary offered her own years before when she said, “let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). That offering has brought her to this day in the temple and to this encounter with the sword.

Our spiritual lives will be hindered or hastened, depending upon the quality of what we offer. If we present to God only peripheral aspects of our lives that we have designated as expendable, then our spiritual lives will develop erratically and intermittently with no consistent progress evident. Growth lies in offering all of life. Like Mary, we too will hear words or have experiences that reveal Jesus as the Promised One for us, the One to whom we must offer everything. The sword challenges us to faith and fidelity. The sword awaits our response.



 For Reflection 

To accept God's word and work in her life, Mary had to listen, even when what she heard was confusing or unclear. God does and will speak to us also, and, as it was for Mary, what is said to us may not be immediately discernible. We must listen attentively because God's word comes to us in many ways along various paths.

What is most helpful to me in listening for the word and to the word in my daily life?

How do I know and confirm that what I have heard is God's word in a particular situation or experience?

What must I yet do to be increasingly open to God's word in my life?