



## THE REALITIES OF CHRISTMAS

Text: Luke 2:21-35'

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My kids used to worry that with me being a minister and all my studies I had my head in the clouds. They would think I was 'so heavenly minded I was no earthly good'. I was advised 'Dad, you need to get a real life'. Well today I want to get real and do a reality check on Christmas. Leading up to today we have had several weeks of the 'silly season'. It's been a bustle of attending to all the Christmas cards and Christmas parties. There has been all the advertising and Christmas shopping and carol singing. Christmas is the season where everyone is supposed to forget their differences and drink to 'goodwill'. Even the politicians stop their partisan bickering and wish each the best for the season. People in the street talk to each other as they pass by and wish each other a 'Merry Christmas'. It is wonderful in many ways. And a tragedy in another ways. For too many families Christmas is the hardest time of the year as they struggle with poverty and family breakup. We speak of 'peace and goodwill for all mankind'. But ongoing war and terrorism puts a lie to that. It is only in the Hollywood Christmas movies, that are always shown at this time of the year, that things end like a fairy tale. Just 'follow your heart' they say and they 'live happily ever after'.

But why can't we continue the 'joyous festivities', the 'peace among men' and the 'spirit of giving' into the rest of the year. Perhaps it's because too many are not honest about the realities of life. We try to hide our problems for a day under a party spirit and well wishing instead of openly dealing with the real causes of our problems. I once saw an advertisement from a company to its customers in the local paper. It read 'Happy thoughts and good cheer, to you and yours this coming year.' That's a nice sentiment. It even rhymes. But how were they actually going to achieve that? By make believe? By sentimental hoping and dreaming? We need to face up to the reality that we are a sin saturated people who are not capable of 'peace on earth and good will to all men'. We

need someone to deal with our sin and brokenness. Someone who can actually bring forgiveness and peace into the midst of our real, everyday lives. We also need to face the reality that peace cannot be achieved by Christ's birth alone, but by his death and resurrection. You cannot speak of Christmas without Good Friday and Easter. Otherwise Christmas has little meaning. That's the reality.

Mary and Joseph lived in that reality. Yes, Mary's child was 'Emmanuel', God with us! The angels sang and the shepherds came praising God. It truly was wonderful that the Christ child was born. But the reality was that Mary and Joseph were still part of the sin and struggle of everyday life. The birth of Jesus had not changed anything for them. That was made clear as Jesus was circumcised when he was eight days old. That showed he was subject to the requirements of the Jewish law. Like all Jewish boys Jesus received the sign that he had to put to death the sin in him. Of course, as the Son of God he had no sin. But it showed the reality of the human life he had taken on. Jesus had not come just to make a 'good will visit'; 'God in our midst', now there is peace. He took on our humanness and our sin to deal with it. Already eight days after his wonderful birth his circumcision was a sign of his suffering on the cross. That's why Luke stresses in verse 21, that at his circumcision he was named 'Jesus', meaning 'Jehovah saves'. And 40 days after his birth there were more things that had to be done under the law. Luke tells us in verse 22 "*When the time of their purification according to the law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.*" The provisions of Leviticus made it clear that a woman was regarded as ceremonially unclean for seven days after giving birth. And she required another 33 days to be purified. So for 40 days she could not come near the 'holy things'. She could not come into the temple. Her child was also regarded in the same way. That's why Luke speaks of 'their purification'. So again the reality of our 'uncleanness', of our human sin, comes to the fore. We are unclean and unacceptable in the sight of God.

But there is more. Mary and Joseph also had to bring a sacrifice for Jesus because he was a 'first born'. As Luke writes "(23) "*...as it is written in the Law of the Lord 'Every firstborn child is to be consecrated to the Lord'...*" According to Exodus 13 the death penalty lay on Jesus. When God brought the last curse on Egypt to rescue Israel, he killed all the first born of the Egyptians; people as well as animals. The first born of the Israelites were not killed because of the blood of the lamb placed on the door frames of their houses. God had said to the effect from then on all the first born were his. And

anything that belonged to God had to be sacrificed. However instead of sacrificing the first born child an offering was given to redeem that child. Numbers 18:15-16 says "*...you must redeem every firstborn son...when they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set a five shekels of silver...*" Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph also had to "*...offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons.'*" The sacrifice mentioned there is what was required of the poor. The rich had to provide a lamb and a dove. So do you see the significance of this? The Son of God has come into the world. The awesome creator of all that exists, the holy sinless God is living with his people. But he lives in poverty. And worse. He lives under the curse of sin. As Paul wrote in Galatians "*When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law...*" Here is the reality of the situation. Here is what the whole Old Testament was pointing to in its law on sacrifices. We are a sinful people before a holy God. We need someone to reconcile us with God. Someone holy and unblemished to be a sacrifice to fulfil God's justice. Otherwise there will be no peace and no joy. That is the reality. And that is what Jesus came to do. The whole Old Testament was a preparation for the coming of Jesus.

We see that Simeon knew what Jesus needed to do. Simeon had been "*...waiting for the consolation of Israel'*". He had been waiting a long time for what would bring hope and console his ruined country. For years he had come to the temple, wondering is this the one that all God's promises were about? When he held the baby Jesus he realised 'I am holding the salvation of the world in my arms'! That's when Simeon burst into song. It's the climatic song of Christmas. He praised God because he had been allowed to see the Messiah. In a sense Simeon was the Old Testament night watchman looking for the first light of dawn when the night would finish. The watchman was a slave assigned the job of always being on the lookout for the arrival of a special person. When the person came the watchman was to tell the master. Then he was dismissed and could go off duty. Often the watchman had to wait what seemed a long time. Especially in the night shift. So often the night could seem so long and dark and cold. And now here he was, the Messiah. The light had dawned. And Simeon was singing the swan song of the Old Testament.

But Simeon we see was also a prophet. And by the Spirit he knew at what cost Jesus would 'console Israel.' It seems Mary and Joseph had not fully grasped it all yet. Verse 33 tells us "*The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him.*"

Especially the extent of the salvation Jesus would bring: (verse 32) "*...salvation which you prepared in the sight of all people- a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel.*" In other words, Simeon is saying to Mary and Joseph this child of theirs would affect the entire world. That's a new thought here. The previous Christmas songs of Mary and Zachariah were Jewish. They thought in Jewish terms only. But Simeon makes it clear this child will shine a light and bring hope to every nation, every people group, every language on the earth. That includes us here. That means there is hope for all and anyone at this time of Christmas. If you are lonely this year, Simeon meant to include you. If your family has rejected you, Simeon meant to include you. If you feel forgotten, depressed, discouraged Christmas is for you! Whatever sins are holding you back this year, Christmas means that you can be forgiven, because Jesus came for you.

Mary and Joseph had not grasped how Jesus would bring a 'light' to the 'gentiles' and a 'glory to Israel'. But Simeon saw it. He saw this child 'Jesus', God's own son, would "*...be spoke against ...*" He would be rejected, rebuked, hated. For Mary that rejection and suffering of her son would be like a (35) "*...sword piercing her soul...*" Especially so when in 33 years time she would watch him die on the cross, rejected by all in Jerusalem. That's the reality of Christmas too. Not everyone likes to hear that. Jesus suffered because he carried our guilt. Jesus died because the world rejected him "*...a sign to be spoken against.*" Not everyone wants to admit that we all need to change our ways before God. That we need to repent. It's ironic how so many people love to celebrate Christmas. But then say 'don't give us any of that religious stuff.' We may not like it, but we must realise that our reaction to the crucified Christ "*...will reveal the thoughts of many*" as Simeon put it (35). Our reaction will show whether Jesus is causing us to fall or rise. Simeon was very pointed when he said (verse 34) "*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.*" Simeon meant that those who see themselves as strong, relying on their own merit and power will come to ruin. Because in their pride they don't see their need of Jesus. But the humble ones, those who bow before Jesus with repentance and faith, will be raised up to eternal life. No one will be able to have a neutral attitude towards Jesus. You can't sit on the fence. Jesus will divide. Those who reject him will in the end fall. Those who accept him will rise to salvation.

Here again we see how Christmas is distorted in our culture. Too often we have the angels sing in our carols 'Peace on earth to all men'. But they never sang that. They sang *"Peace on earth to men on whom his favour rests."* And the stark reality is that God's favour does not rest on 'all men'. His judgement rests on all people. And yes his offer for reconciliation is given to all people. But his 'favour' rests on those who acknowledge Jesus, born of the virgin, who is God's son. His favour rests on those who accept that through his death and resurrection Jesus has attained forgiveness with God. That gift of grace is open to anyone who comes in repentance. Let me ask you what is Jesus to you this morning? He's life or death. He's heaven or hell. He's joy or sorrow. He's guilt or forgiveness. He's salvation or condemnation. He's everlasting life or everlasting punishment. Which is it for you? That's what Simeon is saying. This little baby who is the glory of Israel, who is the light of the world, is also the great divider of the human race. You're either on one side or on the other regarding Jesus. No one stays forever in the middle.

May be with all this talk of sin, and Christ's suffering, you may think 'Hey, you are taking away the simple fun of a merry Christmas.' Actually it's about being real. I want to make sure we have true joy and peace instead of a false dream that shatters after the Christmas season. It's like a stop sign. Stop. Think. Face reality. Christ has come. That is the celebration of Christmas. Now we all have to make a choice; we and all our friends and family- everybody. That is the reality. A choice that divides. A choice that has us fall or rise. What will it be for you?

If Jesus is for you forgiveness, hope and life then understand your calling. With Simeon we have the change of the guard. It is the end of one watch, the Old Testament. But it is also the beginning of another watch as the glimmers of dawn have arrived. Now it's our turn to watch for the consolation of the whole creation, to constantly pray for the arrival of Jesus the second time. Like Simeon we need to live each day in the expectation that this is the day we see Jesus arrive to bring justice and peace to every part of the universe. That affects our priorities and focus in life. Our passion should be to make disciples for Jesus. Our focus should be on making it clear everyone has a choice to make. And our hearts and prayers should be saying 'Come Lord Jesus, come quickly'. As the hymn writer put it: 'Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up how long, and soon their night of weeping, shall be the morn of song.'

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- How has Christmas been distorted in our culture? What do you really have left if you take the Christ out of Christmas?
  
- What were the implications of the Old Testament rituals that Mary & Joseph went through with Jesus? What significance do they have for us?
  
- What do we mean that Simeon was the night watchman of the Old Testament? Why was he so joyful to see the Christ child? What was his message to Mary, to us all?