

Sermon 12 January 2025 Being transformed by Christ

Luke 2:21-35

According to the law every firstborn male was sacred to God and so had to be taken to the temple and be presented to God. *'Dedicate to me all the firstborn sons of Israel. They are mine.'* Exodus 13:2. So Joseph and Mary go to the temple and do just that. There they meet a very interesting person, Simeon. A word about Simeon.

The Jews regarded their nation as the chosen people and so would one day rule the world. In order to achieve this they believed a powerful leader would emerge to enable them to conquer all nations. This would be their expected and prophesied Messiah.

However, there were a few people who had no dreams of power and armies. They believed in a life of prayer as they waited for the Messiah, who would be quite different to the all-conquering hero expected by so many of their fellow countrymen. Simeon was one of these. The Messiah he awaited was one who would bring comfort to his people, and God had promised that he would set eyes on this Messiah before his life ended. When Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to the temple, Simeon recognises him as the promised Messiah. He takes him in his arms and he utters those immortal words which have since become what is known as the Nunc Dimittus, one of the great songs of our Church.

'Lord, now I can lie down in peace! As you have promised me, I have seen the Saviour you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel.' Luke 2:29-32. Wonderful words.

Simeon then blesses the baby Jesus and tells Mary that he will be rejected by many people, much to their detriment. However, he will bring joy to many people. But, and it is a big but, he also tells Mary that *'a sword will pierce your own soul too.'* These are hardly comforting words for Mary. Her baby's life has hardly begun and Simeon is warning her of future grief.

We know that any journey through life will encounter a degree of grief on its way – that's life, so to speak – but his reference to a sword piercing her soul really does take that grief to another level. We know what Mary went through during those last three days of Jesus' life, so this is what Simeon is referring to.

However, there are also very hopeful and comforting words for Mary: *'He will be the greatest joy to many others.'* Simeon is making a very important point here. Life brings hard times, its share of suffering, but also its share of triumphs and joy. The point Simeon is making is that Jesus will not only be a source of joy for so many, but also a light for us to follow. I quote, *'A light for revelation to the Gentiles.'* Biblical commentator, Victoria Johnson, wrote some wonderful words as she reflected on this passage.

'Like a beam of pure light, this child will expose sin and hatred and injustice. He will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Like a refiner's fire, this child will cleanse and purify and recreate us in his image. It is no consolation to stand before this child, for we will be transformed; we will be changed.' Herein lies the essence of this message. I want to share a true story with you.

Johnny Lee Clary was the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma in the 1960s. He was once invited to speak on a radio station with this opponent, the Reverend Wade Watts, a black minister.

When the minister held out his hand for a handshake, no way was this Grand Dragon going to take it. Clary hated Watts.

Clary says his hatred was honed by his father, who taught him at the age of five to hurl racial slurs out the car window, and his uncle, who regaled him with stories about shooting black men. The only one not filled with hatred as his grandmother, who read to him from the Bible.

When Clary wound up on the radio station with Watts, the minister said, 'Hello, Mr Clary. I'm Reverend Watts. Before we go in, I just want to tell that I love you and Jesus loves you.' The debate went on but the Reverend's calm so rattled Clary that he stormed out. What happened next is in Clary's own words.

'I gathered my things and was heading through the lobby when the Reverend appeared. I would have gladly pushed him out of the way except he was holding a baby in his arms. "Mr Clary, this is my daughter, Tia. I have one last question for you." He held out a little girl with shining dark eyes and skin, and one of the sweetest expressions I had ever seen. "You say you hate all black people, Mr Clary. Just tell me – how can you hate this child?"

Stunned, I turned and almost ran. I heard the Reverend call after me, "I'm going to love you and pray for you, Mr Clary, whether you like it or not!" I didn't like it. Over the next ten years I had two burning goals. One was to climb the Klan's national ranks to the position of Imperial Wizard. The second was to make Reverend Watts pay for what he had done. I would make him hate me.'

Over the next few years, Johnny Lee Clary did everything in his power to do just that. Klansmen barraged the Reverend's family with threatening phone calls. His windows were broken. Effigies were torched on his lawn. His church was burned to the ground. In 1975 Johnny Lee Clary was appointed Imperial Wizard. He had just gone through a costly divorce and lost custody of his little daughter. In desperation, he focussed on a new goal. He wanted to unify all hate groups, from skinheads to neo-Nazis, under the umbrella of the Klan. He arranged a national meeting where these groups would meet and hopefully unite in strength.

This was to be the culmination of Clary's efforts. But on the day of the gathering, the Klan, the skinheads and the neo-Nazis all started fighting. By the time Clary arrived, his unity meting was a shambles. As he looked out over the stormy proceedings, he realised that these groups wanted to 'purify' the world and have it all be like them – but they hated one another. Did he really want to live in a world of people like that? Were those people to be his family?

Suddenly, he felt repulsed by the poison that swirled around him. He felt sick to the stomach. He turned and walked out the door. Eventually, he told the other Klan officials he was giving up his position and leaving the group forever. He fell into deep depression and even contemplated ending his life. It was then that he happened to come across an old Bible belonging to his grandmother. He picked it up and it fell open to the parable of the prodigal son. He read the story three times, then fell on his knees and wept.

He quietly joined a small church, whose congregation was multi-racial, and kept a low profile. Two years passed and finally he made a phone call he had to make. 'Reverend Watts, I need to tell you that I resigned from the KKK two years ago and I have given my heart to the Lord and I am now a member of an inter-racial church.' 'Praise the Lord,' he shouted, 'I've never stopped praying for you. Would you do me the honour of speaking at my church?'

When he stepped up to speak at his church, he told his story simply, not hiding from the past or sugar-coating the depth of his involvement. Then he told how God had changed all the hate in his heart to love. There was silence when he had finished. Then a beautiful teenage girl ran down the aisle towards him and embraced him. He glanced up and saw that Reverend Watts was weeping. 'Don't you know who that is, Johnny Lee? That is my daughter, Tia. That's my baby.'

To say that Johnny Lee Clary had undergone a transformation would be an understatement. What brought about that transformation? Very simply, God's love as expressed through Jesus Christ. It is the life-changing love referred to by Simeon in his revelation, '*Lord, I have seen the Saviour you have given to all people.*' The emphasis here is on 'all', you, me and all those who struggle to walk in God's light.