

## Luke 2:25-35

I hope your Christmas went to plan this year, but I think we've all known times when Christmas didn't go according to plan. We all know how it should go, but sometimes, somebody or something changes the plans for us.

Of course there are many times when our Christmas isn't as joyful as we expect, when we've lost people we love, when we're separated from friends and family, when families are broken up, when we're unemployed, when we're sick or those we love are sick. When plans are spoiled by Covid or bushfires or floods or cyclones. All those times when Christmas is not so joyous.

In our gospel reading today, we have a prophecy that seems not very joyous – a message that might not quite match with the Christmas message 'Peace on earth among those whom he favours' that we know so well. Simeon was an old man who was righteous and devout - and God had promised him he would not die until he had seen the Messiah (Luke 2:26)

Tradition has it that Simeon was 113 years old – although there's no indication in our scriptures of his precise age. But we do know that Simeon was old and had been waiting and watching with Anna for the saviour to come.

Since the time of the exile, Israel had been invaded and conquered several times. Simeon and Anna lived under the Roman occupation, which began approximately 60 years before Jesus was born. The day when a Jewish monarch faithfully ruled Israel was in the far distant past, but the Jewish faithful knew that, one day, the Messiah would come to restore the people and the nation. Not all was well in world in which Simeon lived so, of course, he longed for the restoration of Israel.

It was the Jewish Law for every newborn male to be circumcised on the eighth day - it was considered the sign and seal of the covenant God had made with Abraham (Gen. 17). The Jewish people were proud to be God's covenant people – God's chosen people – and both Joseph and Mary were part of that covenant people.

This ritual, his circumcision, would mark the start of Jesus' entry into traditional Jewish life.

But Jesus arrival at the temple was symbolic beyond the traditional Jewish rituals. The prophet Ezekiel had long ago had a vision (Ezekiel 10:18) in which the glory of the Lord – God's presence – departed the temple. And now, in Jesus, God's presence was returning to the temple.

When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple, Simeon took the eight-day old Jesus into his arms, and Simeon praised God.

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel." (2:29-32)

Simeon could rest easy. In Jesus, the saviour that Simeon – and all Israel – had waited so long for had arrived, but what Simeon declared that day went beyond what the people of Israel had come to expect: He said that the salvation would be for the gentiles as well as the people of Israel.

We read that both Joseph and Mary were amazed at what was being said about their child. That might be surprising, because they'd both been visited by angels, and they'd been visited by the

shepherds who'd told them what the angels had said. They would have been familiar with the prophecies about the messiah too, and known that their baby was that messiah. But even so... Jesus was just a baby.

But Simeon didn't stop there... He blessed them and then prophesied. And things get a bit dark – far from simply rejoicing because he's met the saviour, Simeon makes a declaration that's just not good news of great joy... instead his prophecy includes bad news: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (2:34b-35)

This saviour, this baby, Jesus, is destined to cause the falling and rising of many... and to be a sign that will be spoken against... the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And finally, and very personally, a sword will pierce the soul of his parents.

It's bad news – at least for some if not most. The news of God's plan had so far been good news for Mary and Joseph - but now Simeon was revealing that there was bad news too.

He told them "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel".

And sure enough, as we read through the gospel accounts, we know that Jesus would cause some to be lifted up and encouraged... but others to be destroyed. The poor and the outcast would be lifted up and encouraged – leprosy would be healed, unfair judgements revoked (ie the woman caught in adultery), the lame would walk, the blind would see. On the other hand – there was the rich young man too caught up in his wealth the follow Jesus and there were the scribes and the pharisees too caught up in their power and privelege.

Simeon tells them that their child will "be a sign that will be spoken against".

From his birth, Jesus would be opposed. From Herod sending soldiers to kill him – along with all the male children in Bethlehem – through to the people in his home town wanting to throw him off a cliff, to the Pharisees and the Sadducees who tried to entrap him, to Judas who betrayed him, to the Jewish leaders who condemned him, to the Romans who crucified him.

The opposition didn't end there, though – after his resurrection, the opposition to him and his followers continued – we read about it in the book of Acts, we read about it throughout history, and we see it – and sometimes experience it – today.

Simeon says, "the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." And as we read the gospel accounts of Jesus ministry, we learn it's not just actions, but our motivations, our thoughts that are the problem. Jesus taught "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;" (Matt 5:21-22)

And finally, he says "and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

We don't know Joseph's fate, but we do know that Mary would watch as her son was terribly beaten and as he died on the cross. Her soul was certainly pierced.

These are strange things to prophesy about the coming of the saviour – and they're strange things to reflect on at Christmas: For most people, in the western world, at least, Christmas is a fun and exciting time of year – in most years, anyway.

But we need to see the whole story of Christmas. Jesus didn't enter this world just to be a cute little baby, and give us all warm and fuzzy feelings each Christmas. He entered the world to suffer and die on a cross so that our sins might be forgiven and so that we might be saved.

And, if you think about it, that first Christmas wasn't all joy. It was a young couple, far away from home, the woman pregnant and giving birth in an animal stall.

Far, far removed from the conditions of a modern birth – but even far removed from the ideal conditions of the time.

It is the story of innocent boys being killed by King Herod because Herod feared one of them might be the rival king.

It is the story of someone - sent into the world in peace and love - who was condemned to death.

It is the story of a light sent to shine in the darkness, and that light being temporarily snuffed out.

It was bad news.

But I don't think Simeon looked at it that way.

Yes, his words of prophecy were definitely filled with "bad news", but these weren't the only words Simeon had to say about the saviour. When he first saw Jesus, he declared:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

In Jesus, Simeon had been allowed to SEE God's salvation.

He's seen the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel.

Yes, there were going to be dark moments surrounding this young baby, but they all pale in comparison to what this child was going to accomplish. Jesus had come to give light and bring hope and salvation. Light into darkness. Hope to the hopeless. Salvation to the fallen.

Christmas is a time to take the words of Jesus to heart "God so loved the World that He gave His only begotten Son."

The world is harsh. Bad things happen all the time. To people. To families. To entire nations.

These are hardships and tragedies wherever we look.

But the most common message from the story of Jesus' birth is this:

"Don't be afraid!"

When the angel told Zechariah he was to be the father of John the Baptist, he declared:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." Luke 1:13

When the angel visited Joseph, he told him:

"Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:20

When the angel told Mary he started with the same four words:

"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31)

And when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the fields, they told them:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11

Again and again and again, God told people – "don't be afraid."

But why shouldn't we be afraid? This life is often unpleasant and frustrating. There's lots to be afraid of.

But we needn't be afraid because we have received "Good news that shall be for all people".

And Simeon said the same thing. When he saw Jesus, the Christ child, he declared He would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory of your people Israel." Luke 2: 32

The world is filled with darkness, and we so often know it so well in our own lives that it's hard to see what lies ahead.

But Simeon reminds us that Jesus brings light into our lives.

We just need to open our hearts to him. To let his light shine in our lives.

No matter how dark things may be for us and the people we love. God's love is there for us. God loves us so much that he sent his son into this dark, fallen world to bring light and hope.

Society, the world, and indeed the church so often says that Christmas should be a time filled with joy and happiness. And often there is, but so often there is also sadness and emptiness and loneliness and despair.

Just watching television news this week, there are so many people, who are despairing and angry at the circumstances they face.

People often expect that Christmas will be filled with joy and happiness. But the essence of Christmas, is of light shining in a dark place, the essence of Christmas is hope.

And it is in that hope that we rejoice, not because all the problems of our lives and this world have been solved. But because we, like Simeon, rejoice in the gift of a saviour.

A saviour who is God's redeeming love for us.

Whether we are going through the worst of times or the best of times, we have that love, and we have that hope.

The hope that the infant Jesus brought into a fallen world.

The hope that Jesus brings into all our lives.

Amen.