

5/13/2001

## A PERSONAL WORD FOR YOU from Mack McCarter

### “Looking Under The Dark”

When Judy and I came back to Shreveport in January of 1990, among the many remarkable people that God placed in our path was a wonder of a man by the name of J.C. Clement. “Brother Clement” as everyone called him was a “retired” Southern Baptist preacher. Our meeting was simply meant to be.

The second Sunday of our stay here, we read about a church that was seeking to join folks of all races together in worship and fellowship. It was the New Elizabeth Baptist Church on Jewella under the shepherding of Pastor Danny Mitchell. That looked so fresh and promising that we attended the very same Sunday with great expectations.

The reception was wonderfully warm. And yet person after person asked us if we had met “Brother Clement” and his wife. Brother Clement was absent that Sunday but they absolutely urged us to come to his weekly Bible Study there at the church. My curiosity was raging. “I will see this ‘Brother Clement,’” I said to myself.

Thursday came. I went to the Bible Study. I met “Brother Clement.” And I rarely missed his Bible Study for the next two years!! Let me tell you why.

J.C. Clement was at least seventy years old. He was a big man, with a shock of white hair, and a face that was mostly red, interrupted by the most engaging smile you will every encounter, and punctuated by piercing blue eyes that loved you while looking all of the way into you. He taught his small Bible Study class (there were never more than twenty of us) as if he was standing in the stoutest pulpit in the land. As the reformer John Knox would say, he stood sixteen feet above contradiction!

It was an old fashioned Bible Study. He would lead us in the exposition of the scriptures for about forty minutes speaking in a cathedral voice rich in deep baritone resonance. And while I am certain that the “study” was the recitation of previously preached sermons, there was nothing old about him or his message. He simply staggered me. Then after he finished, and after I always had the peculiar feeling that I needed to walk outside and let the wind blow on me just to see what was left of me, we would have “discussion.”

This man was compelling. You know what I mean. When you come into the presence of someone with the God given gift of *charisma*, you know that the person is the dynamic behind the message. I think of Aristotle dissecting rhetoric, and I know why he pronounced that the strongest element in declamation by far was *not* the need of the audience (*pathos*) and it was *not* the message that was delivered (*logos*) but the most powerful element of speech was the *character of the speaker (ethos!)*

I learned at the feet of J.C. Clement because he was such an immense man. And I learned *about* “Brother Clement.” Reverend J.C. Clement had been the pastor of Lakeshore Baptist Church. In the years when the south was finally being liberated in our thinking and our theology that we are all children of God, Pastor Clement pushed for a vote by the congregation that all would be welcome as members. The congregation voted

not to allow a black person to join Lakeshore Baptist Church. On that Sunday Pastor and Mrs. J.C. Clement resigned!!

As the years went by, Lakeshore Baptist Church also resigned and closed the doors. The building was donated to the Northwest Louisiana Baptist Conference. And soon with hearts made new and eyes seeing clearly, the Conference donated the building to the predominantly black congregation, New Elizabeth Missionary Baptist Church, under the pastoral leadership of Dr. Danny Mitchell!! Now listen to this!

On the very first Sunday that New Elizabeth worshipped in their “new” church building, the first couple to join the church was Dr. and Mrs. J.C. Clement!! They both put their oars in the water and begin to pull. I know that you will agree, here was a man who walked the talk. Now when you meet folks like that, stop and listen, because they will always teach you something important about life.

“Brother Clement” told marvelous stories. His descriptions were so rich that you could see, and hear, and taste, and smell his stories. One story I heard him tell, I’ll just never forget. I titled it, “*Looking Under The Dark.*”

J.C. grew up over in the Louisiana delta area in the thirties. He said it was before the electric co-op brought light to the rural river region. He described night so dark you could feel it. He told about his best friend growing up, a young man named John Calendar, who just happened to be black. They had great adventures together, along with J.C.’s twin brother. They played, they hunted, they fished, they built tree houses and forts. They had a grand time.

On one outing, coming back from fishing, and dark beginning to fall, they were on a path, when all of a sudden, John fell flat down to the ground, right ear hugging the dirt, eyes peeled. He jumped back up and said, “J.C. there is a man coming this way on a horse and he’ll be here in about five minutes.” J.C. relates that he said, “John, you’re crazy. Why we can hardly see our hands in front of our faces, how can you see down the path?”

Then J.C. laughingly recalls that John answered, “Why J.C. everybody knows that when dark falls, it don’t come all the way down. And if you get real low and press you face flat on the ground, you can *look under the dark!*”

J.C. said, I would have howled, but I didn’t want to hurt John’s feelings. So we walked on, he said. In about five minutes, a man on a horse passed by them going the other way. J.C. said, “You know, Mack, I know that it can’t be true that dark doesn’t come all the way down when it falls, but every now and then, I am tempted to get down and see if I can look under the dark!”

**Friends, over the past few weeks we have had some pretty bad news about our state. We are lowest on the list of good things and highest on the list of bad things. Sometimes it looks dark. But when I get down to rest on some real substance, I can see the good news under the bad news, I see that there are thousands more folks here who want to help people than the few who want to hurt people. And if we can unite the lights in all of the caring hearts, then we can stop cursing the dark and win back our communities!!**

So, come and join us in this great mission of rebuilding the culture of caring!! Start looking under the dark!! Thank you Brother Clement!!