

LUKE 19:1-10
THE GOD OF SURPRISES

Do you like surprises? We're talking good surprises here! Some people love to be surprised and simply take it in their stride; it doesn't matter what you throw at them, they'll cope. Whether it is a surprise birthday party, a surprise trip, or an outing somewhere, even if quite unexpected, they simply take it in their stride and thrive on it. Other people can't cope with surprises like that: they need to know what's happening and anything out of the ordinary, or surprising throws them out altogether; the surprise birthday party would leave them all of a dither and they'd simply want to go away into another room and hide! Different personalities react in different ways to good surprises. Me, it depends on the mood I'm in as to my reaction: if I'm in a good mood, I'll take it in my stride, but there are other times, when I'd rather not have that disturbance and just love the quiet life!

How many of us expect to be surprised in Church? Not many, I suspect. In fact many of us don't want to be surprised in Church on Sunday morning when we come to worship. We find comfort in the familiarity of normal routines. We use the same basic order of service each week, so that the only things that change are the hymns and readings; we know what to expect next and find it profoundly uncomfortable if what comes next is not what we expected. The only problem is that there is a very fine line between these comfortable routines and unchangeable ruts which leave us caught in the past or with hearts closed to the promptings of the Spirit. So often, we want to come to Church to find that things are as they always were and that nothing has changed; we want to find comforting, reassuring words that will help us deal with the world that's constantly changing around us.

The God of Surprises is the title of a book by Gerard Hughes: the book is written to help Christians find the hidden treasure of God's presence with in and around us and he does talk about God as having compassion for all creation and His Spirit in us, but he also writes about God disturbing and challenging our prejudices and false securities; He is the God who surprises us, if only we let Him. Hughes gives us all kinds of tools in the book to help us discover something of that treasure; at one point he suggests reading a gospel and reading it as our own self-portrait "for Christ is what we are called to become" (p113) The book is in the library if you want to read more of it. God is the God of surprises: good surprises and come in all sorts of ways: CS Lewis talked about being *Surprised by Joy* as God came to him and converted him; we are surprised that God loves people like us and He does; we are surprised by the Spirit challenging our preconceived ideas about God and Church and the Bible and life and faith and even challenging our prejudices and fears so that we change way we think.

That's what happened in the story of Zaccheus that Luke tells in ch19 of his gospel. Indeed there are surprises all round in this little story. Every time I read or preach this story, there is something else to see in it. Zaccheus was the chief tax-collector in Jericho; it was a big area, a rich town, so he would be a rich and important man. He was employed by the Romans to collect tax and revenue from people who lived in and travelled through Jericho. He was an important man, but someone suggested that he was also the "loneliest man in Jericho" because no-one loved Zaccheus. He was a collaborator with the enemy, with the occupying Roman army; he has made himself rich at other people's expense, taking more money from them than the Romans wanted and keeping the rest for himself; so he was a greedy man. There is a little legend around Matthew, Jesus' disciple, also a tax-collector who once said to Jesus "If you're ever down Jericho way, I wish you would do something to help a

friend of mine, Zaccheus by name.” This has no basis in Scripture, but it’s not beyond imagination.

Jesus entered Jericho, followed, we assume, by His little band of disciples, on their way to Jerusalem for Palm Sunday. What happened next was to a surprise Zaccheus, the disciples, and the crowd!

Zaccheus: he wanted to see Jesus; we’re not sure why, but something inside him made him want to see that man who was coming to his town. Maybe, Matthew had told Zaccheus about Jesus and what Jesus had done for him and Matthew’s story had made an impression on Zaccheus! He wanted to see, but was a small man and the crowd was in no mood to let him through to the front; they would not give any concessions to Zaccheus! So he climbed tree; that was even better because from there he could see without really being seen by the crowd or by Jesus, so he thought. But as Jesus walked along Main St Jericho, he came to the bottom of the tree, stopped deliberately and looked up: “*Zaccheus...*” (v5) ‘It is necessary that I come to your house’ – not just a nice idea, but some kind of divine necessity is implied here. Zaccheus, who wanted to stay hidden, to see without being seen, is now firmly in the spotlight; does he nearly fall out of the tree? “Jesus wants to come to my house? Who am I to have Him in my house? Does He really know what I’m like? Does He know who I am? Does he know what other people think of me?” He is taken completely by surprise! But he goes!

Crowd: they are gobsmacked! They know exactly who Zaccheus is; they know exactly what Zaccheus is like. “*All the...*” (v7) Muttering is always a bad sign; nobody will tell Jesus He’s wrong to His face, nor ask why, but they’ll talk about Him behind His back and now they’re criticising Him for going to Zaccheus’ house! It is the wrong place to go; he’s the wrong person to spend time with in Jericho, according to the crowd. Zaccheus is a ‘sinner’, one of these people who has made lots of mistakes, whose life is a mess, who is an outsider from the crowd and who is beyond the pale as far as the crowd is concerned. They are surprised that Jesus should even go there. One of their deepest, strongest prejudices was challenged; surprised that Jesus should do this. They were closed to the promptings of the Spirit, closed to the possibility that God thinks that what Jesus is doing is a good thing.

Disciples: they are actually not mentioned in this story at all, so let’s use our imagination for a moment; we’re told that they went everywhere with Jesus so we assume they are watching. How did they feel? Well, Matthew might just be praying ‘Lord, please let this be time for Zaccheus to discover what I’ve found in Jesus.’ Others are having a quiet smile to themselves that here is Jesus meeting someone else to help, but even they would not be prepared for what happened next. We’re not sure how the disciples would react to all of this; they had seen Jesus do this kind of thing before, but we’re not always sure they got it till afterwards!

“*Zac stood up...*” (v8) He is a changed man! We have no way of knowing what passed between Jesus and Zaccheus, the conversation is not recorded. But we do know that whatever it was, Zaccheus came out changed for ever. Not only will he stop being greedy and stealing, but here he promised to give it back. Half of his possessions will go to poor and he will pay back four times the amount he’d stolen. It would not be a short list, the people he had cheated, but he will pay them back. He was surprised by Jesus, by His grace, by His willingness to accept Zaccheus as he is, by His willingness to forgive Zaccheus his faults and mistakes. His encounter with Jesus had left him a changed man. We are left to think that Zaccheus became a disciple, and lived the rest of his life by faith, looking to be like Jesus all of His days. The disciples were left to ponder: later they created a Church that offered gospel to

anyone and everyone; perhaps the encounter with Zaccheus helped them see this surprising truth from God: the gospel is for everyone, no-one is excluded. So Jesus: *"The Son..."* (v10) The Church's mission is to reflect what Jesus came to do.

God has always been like this, surprising people all through the Bible. Take the piece we read from Isaiah: The whole tenor of that passage is how Israel has failed; their religion has gone awry and all these offerings they're bringing are meaningless according to the prophet because of the people's huge failures. Their offerings and religion have become a burden to God and the people are seen as trampling courts of Lord rather than being people of faith and prayer. What will happen next? God is surely going to chase them away, write them off forever because of their failures. But no! The end of the passage changes completely; He takes us by surprise: *"Come now..."* (1:18) God promises to forgive; God promises that all these faults and failures will be washed away and the people are offered a new beginning in life. The challenge they now face it to change their behaviour. There is a future!

We all have expectations of God and He just loves to turn these expectations upside down. I've had conversations with people who've got into trouble and I have listened to them quietly without comment on their mistakes and have simply tried to reflect the way I see Jesus behave and the God of the Bible; people have expressed surprise that I've not condemned them for their mistakes; why would I condemn them, since God offers to forgive? They gone away surprised by God. We expect that God will make huge demands of us before He will bless us, but we discover that a God of grace accepts us as we are, and blesses us richly. We expect that God will be soft and pleasant to us all of time, but the Spirit goes to work on us to challenge our prejudices, our attitudes and we are disturbed by that; God disturbs us and challenges us to change, just when we thought life was comfortable.

People have perceptions and expectations of Church, that we are old fuddy-duddies, that our worship is boring and stuck in past, that we have nothing to offer the real world in the 21st century. God just loves to confound these expectations as people come to taste what Church is really like and really about. We fall down if we simply conform to these expectations, but God is not like that; the gospel is not like that, so why should the church of God, shaped by the gospel, be irrelevant and boring? Let's surprise the world!

God is more loving than we ever expect. God is more patient with us than we ever imagine. God is more generous to us than we can ever conceive. God challenges us in ways we could never expect. God disturbs our prejudices and preconceived ideas more often than we would like to admit. The God of surprises? Be open to surprises and walk with God!