

Christmas Surprise

I want to suggest that one of the most important items in the whole of Christmas, is wrapping paper.

Because wrapping paper has one purpose above all
The purpose of wrapping paper is to keep the gift a surprise

It can hint at the gift, wrapping paper will tell you that if the gift is a book, then looking at the wrapping paper you'll know not to expect a motorbike

And if the gift is a necklace then when its wrapped, you're likely to wonder if it might be an item of jewellery and you'll not be expecting a food processor (not unless it was a very big neckland indeed).

Wrapping paper, gives enough of a hint of what the thing is, to give you the rough shape of what is coming
But it conceals from you what the actual gift is.

Wrapping paper is what keeps things a surprise
And the surprise is ruined if someone doesn't bother with wrapping paper – perhaps giving your gift in a Marks and Spencer bag
Or wraps so poorly that the wrapping paper is starting to fall off.

There is something important about not quite knowing what is going to happen
It builds us up to wonder
And particular if the giver really really knows us
Then the gift will exceed what we most hoped for
And give us what we needed
Rather than just what we wanted.

It strikes me that Christmas is full of surprises,
God seems to love to surprise at Christmas,
Giving people what they needed and not what they wanted
And giving a gift that upsets them, disturbs them, momentarily even disappoints them
But turns out to be even more than all they wanted
God gives us what we needed.

This is a wonderful picture of God
Who is so aware of our life,
So aware of the shape of who we are
And is intimately involved in our being
And the invitation always is to trust him
Even when the surprises send us in the wrong direction
Or disappoint us
Or are so so far away from what we want,

Or turns the whole of our world upside down.

Disturbingly, those are the kinds of surprises that God seems to specialise in at Christmas time

The kinds of surprises that we need to come to expect from God

Who seems to know that something which shocks us and even perhaps trips us up

Is what we need

In order to grow into becoming the people he intended us to be

And to be people whose words and lives

Point to Jesus Christ who saves us.

The first Christmas surprise comes to the Priest Zechariah

Who is told he is going to become a father

This was a hope that he had had from long long ago

But had learned to carefully guard his disappointment

So he didn't go there any more

So he learned to rely on other things – perhaps his job

And the prestige of being a priest

In order to hide from his deepest pain and loss.

So that when the angel comes and tells him that the thing that he most most wanted, a son, is going to be given to him

All the old defences are up, and he chooses not to believe

The angel makes him silent,

In what is both seemingly a punishment and a gift

In order that he will come to understand,

And understand he will

Singing the most beautiful song about his son John

Who will come as a light

In the brightness of the dawn

To give to his own people

And to all the nations.

So that is the surprise of Zechariah

The gift that is almost too good

That at first he can't believe it.

There is the surprise that comes to Mary

To hear that she is pregnant,

A 12 year old whose pregnancy will cause scandal and the possible loss of her engagement.

Who will mean that she have a son

Whose death will come before hers

And a sword will pierce her heart

Who must take the risk of childbirth far from home

This is the surprise,

The disturbing surprise that comes to Mary

And Mary above all seems quickest to accept
And sing, like Zechariah, of all that God has done.

So Mary's surprise is one which will put her in danger
Which will lead to her heart being broken
Does that surprise remind you of any surprises that have been given you?

Then there is the surprise to Joseph
Like Zechariah he is an upright man
But now he is put in a position, where Mary has become pregnant before marriage
And there is great shame that will perhaps haunt his reputation for years
Indeed thirty years later, people will refer to Jesus as the son of Mary in his home village
Perhaps remembering that Joseph's fatherhood was called into question

He must risk reputation, and his good name
To love and to follow the path of love
Sometimes love takes you outside of the lines
Out of the places that you expected to go
Out to the places where your reputation is dishonoured
Yet still you must faithfully love
This is what Joseph must do.

So Joseph's surprise will cost him reputation
But it will also give him a son,
It will mean him living life as a refugee
But he will see dreams of angels
Reminding him that he too – despite all the surprises – remains part of God's plan.

So perhaps your surprise is like Joseph?

Or what about the surprise of the wise men,
Who look up to the stars and see something that contradicts their knowledge, their science
and their expectation
Which leads to where they do expect – Jerusalem
And leads them on to where they do not expect – Bethlehem

It will mean dealing with powerful people
With their lives
And their hidden agendas.
It also means that these wise men will give the best of themselves
And be the very first to worship Jesus.

There are the surprises for them of the star, the journey, the scriptures, all that sends them
in different ways, the powerful men who must be avoided, and going home by another way.

Going home by another way, seems like a metaphor for the whole of Christmas
Going home by another way

So what is the home that you are being called towards
And how is it that you are being lead there?

And might it be that in all of our journeys we would meet with Christ,

Meet with him
Be changed by him
Be saved from our sins

Let the stories of
Zechariah
Mary
Joseph
The Wise Men
Be our stories

May God lead us home
Even if it is by another way
Let God lead us home

AMEN