

## God of surprises

A sermon given on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst  
by Rev John Castle

**Readings: Acts 9:1-22, John 21:1-19**

### Surprises

Which public figure has had a big surprise this week? Clue: it was also a surprise for his mother, who described it as an “almost unbelievable shock”. Archbishop Justin Welby discovered this week that his father was not his mother's first husband, but that he was the son of Winston Churchill's last private secretary.

The BBC's religious affairs correspondent Caroline Wyatt writes:

Justin Welby has lived a life worthy of a protagonist in a Charles Dickens novel, with twists and turns at every new chapter ...

On the surface, his confidence and charm seem typical of the sheen that an education at Eton bestows. He went on to become an oil executive, and travel the world. But for all that apparent privilege, his own childhood, and the younger lives of both the man he assumed to be his father, Gavin Welby, and his mother Jane, were deeply affected by his parents' addiction to alcohol.

And yet, as he and his mother make clear in their public statements, this is not a story of misery but one of redemption, with Justin Welby and his mother both crediting their families and their faith for helping her to overcome alcohol, and for helping him to show that children can overcome a difficult start in life.

### A surprising revelation

Our New Testament reading today speaks of an even bigger surprise that awaited Saul of Tarsus as he approached the city of Damascus with several soldiers and letters to the synagogue leaders authorising him to arrest any Jews who belonged to the new Christian sect. Here was a man who, like our Archbishop, had had a privileged background and a good education, and was a rising star in the religious establishment. His zeal for his faith, which showed itself in his “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1) reminds me of the single-mindedness and passion of some of today's jihadis working for the so-called Islamic State, or the Taliban bombers who recently targeted Christian families relaxing on Easter Sunday in a park in Lahore in Pakistan. Like them, Saul thought he was serving God by persecuting Christians. And then with a flash of light he is thrown to the ground and discovers, to his immense surprise and shock, that the Jesus he is persecuting is not a dead false prophet but the living Lord. We need to pray that the jihadis of Daesh, al-Shabaab, the Taliban and Boko Haram will have a similar revelation.

The Easter story itself shows that our God is a God of surprises. In human terms, the death of Jesus of Nazareth looked like a complete failure on his part to live up to people's expectations of him as the Messiah. You're never going to change the world if you get yourself executed almost as soon as you've started. The Gospels describe his followers' devastation and confusion as their hopes were crushed and their future looked bleak. But they were to discover that Jesus had not only overcome death but by that very death had brought about forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God for all humanity. It was, as Caroline Wyatt described Justin Welby's life, “not a story of misery but one of redemption”. The Resurrection encourages us also to look at our failures, setbacks and losses with the eyes of faith in a God who can redeem anything and bring good out of it.

## **Peter's restoration**

If there was one person who was acutely aware of his need for redemption, it was Simon Peter. Having sworn never to deny Jesus, he found himself carrying the shame of having done so three times in one night. But his encounter with the risen Jesus in today's gospel reading gives him a chance to put that right and have a new start. The incident starts with a surprise – not just seeing Jesus on the beach, but the miraculous catch of fish, echoing a similar event early on in Peter's relationship with Jesus (Luke 5:1-11). In spite of their good efforts and skill, Peter and his friends have caught no fish. But when Jesus gets involved, their net is suddenly full to bursting. It's a reminder to Peter that in order to be effective in his future work for Jesus he will need to depend on the power of Jesus.

Then comes another surprise: Jesus asks Peter “do you love me?” - not once but three times. It distresses Peter that Jesus seems to need that much reassurance. But of course we realise that Jesus is giving him the chance to put right his previous threefold denial. Even *that* can be redeemed. And then Jesus warns him that suffering is ahead before repeating the words he first used when he called Peter in the beginning: “Follow me”.

## **A surprise for Ananias**

It seems that sometimes God uses surprises to get our attention. The catch of fish reminds Simon Peter of his original calling and of the power of Jesus. Saul's surprise encounter with the risen Jesus so traumatises him that he loses his sight and with it his independence. He has to be led into the city of Damascus and wait until God sends Ananias to lay hands on him, so that his sight can be restored and he can be filled with the Holy Spirit. I wonder if we are open to the possibility that God might want to speak to us through the ups and downs of life and help us to look at our lives afresh in the light of his purposes?

If you think that God only speaks to apostles and Archbishops, the story of Ananias should make you think again. Ananias is an ordinary Christian living in Damascus. He is a Jew and attends the synagogue. He has heard about the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of the church hundreds of miles away in Jerusalem, and no doubt he and his fellow Christians in Damascus are hoping that at this distance they will be safe from all that. Then a message comes that Saul of Tarsus is on his way with a warrant for their arrest.

I cannot imagine that anything would have surprised Ananias more than hearing Jesus speak to him in a dream and tell him to seek out Saul and pray for his eyesight to be healed. Ananias's reaction is one of shock. “Lord, you can't possibly be asking me to do this”, he says. “Surely you know that this man is here to drag us in chains to Jerusalem?”

Do you ever find yourself thinking like this? “God, you can't possibly want me to go and talk to that person after all she has done to me?” “God, you can't possibly want me to give *that* sum of money to this appeal?” “God, you surely don't expect me to go outside my comfort zone and volunteer to do *that* job?”

Sometimes it's more convenient to kid ourselves that we are not skilled enough, not experienced enough, not eloquent enough, not rich enough, not outgoing enough to do the job that is staring us in the face. A small group from St Michael's have just spent a few days at Spring Harvest, a Christian conference which this year had the title “Gamechangers”. The theme was all about how each of us can be a “Gamechanger”. We can, with God's help, make a real difference in our own situation, in our society and in the world.

The main Bible character we looked at was Moses. In spite of having an encounter with God in the burning bush, Moses tried every excuse possible to get out of doing what God wanted him to do. “Who am I?”. “Who shall I say sent me?” Suppose they don't believe me?” “I am not good at

speaking". "Please send someone else". But in the end he went, with all his fear and self-doubt, and God used him to deliver Israel from slavery.

And so also Ananias went to find Saul of Tarsus. He was obedient to God, and as a result, Saul of Tarsus became Paul the missionary, who travelled hundreds of miles, founded churches and wrote half the New Testament. Ananias gave it his best shot. He trusted that what the Lord had told him would work. I love the way he greets his arch-enemy.

"Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.<sup>1</sup>

"Brother Saul" - for all he knew, Saul's soldiers could have been just about to arrest him. But he treats him as a brother in Christ, lays hands on him as he has been told, and immediately the power of God flows through his hands and Saul's sight is restored.

I believe that God wants to use each of us, just as he used Ananias, Saul and Simon Peter. It's got nothing to do with how clever, rich, experienced or knowledgeable we are. It's got everything to do with God's power - and our obedience.

### **Are we ready for some surprises?**

So there you have it – another of the Rector's challenging sermons. I'm sorry, but that is the message God has given me to share with you today. Easter is not just a nice story from long ago. It's a message about the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead and to give us new life, new power and new purpose. If we're going to follow Jesus Christ, there will be some surprises along the way. Sometimes God needs to get our attention. Sometimes he may surprise us with how he can redeem hopeless situations, turn enemies into friends and bring us forgiveness, restoration and new purpose.

I don't know what God is calling you to do, now or in the future. But my message today is, be prepared for some surprises. And whatever God tells you to do, just do it. Don't make excuses. Trust God to guide you and work through you. You'll be amazed at what how God can use you to touch lives with healing and love, transform the culture around you and bring others to know the Jesus you have found and are trying to serve.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ac 9:17–18). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.