

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 5th June 2016
Trinity 2 YrC

The God of surprises

In 1985 Gerard Hughes, a Jesuit Priest wrote a book 'God of Surprises', described by Gerald Priestland as "one of the great books of spiritual guidance." I will leave you to either read the book, something I recommend, or if you have read it to reflect on what you read at your leisure. For Fr Gerard, the surprise came in the book's popularity. In the mid-late 80s every parish had a God of Surprises study group and copies of the book on their bookshelves, regardless of their church tradition. Fr Gerard had a way of revealing the truths of the Ignatian spiritual journey that crossed all boundaries. The clarity of writing and simplicity of expression makes his work accessible and informative. Fr Gerard was though truly surprised in God's actions through his work.

I wonder how surprised the widow of Nain was in the way God acted in her life. Whilst taking her son's body to be buried and probably fretting over what will happen to her now her only support has been taken from her, along comes this stranger and almost inconsequentially her son is brought back to life, her future is changed and hope returns to her. We might want to talk here about a parallel here between Jesus and Elijah, possibly aimed at underlining how Jesus' ministry comes from that same divinely inspired stable but was in itself far more powerful, reflected in the ease with which Jesus brings about the resurrection of the widow's son in comparison with that of the widow of Zarephath. I wonder if the point here is how unexpected can the actions of God in the world be.

Elijah had already, by the time we catch up with him today in 1 Kings 17, saved the widow and her son from starvation. God had directed Elijah to Zarephath, during a terrible drought, to be cared for by a widow. On his arrival and meeting with the widow he saves the household from starvation by giving them a jar of meal and a jug of oil that would not run out until the drought was over. If that is not surprising enough of an intervention then the following story, that of the son being revived by Elijah must be. Through prayer and action Elijah revives the son and again restores the fortunes of the family. Again the theme of surprise, imagine how the woman and the son would have reacted to this amazing event in their lives, this breaking in of God who brings them healing and wholeness. It must have been just as amazing and surprising for the widow of Nain and her son. God comes into your life in this surprising, healing way.

At the outset of his part in the gospel story who would have believed Paul would become the co-founder of the earthly ministry of the risen Christ? We first meet him as Stephen, proto-martyr is stoned to death. Saul, as he was, is an arch enemy of the early Church community. He persecutes the church with force and zeal, chasing believers even to Damascus. Yet even here God surprises us and him by breaking into his life, transforming him and showing him the truth of the gospel message. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

These are all amazing biblical tales of God's action in the world, bringing healing and wholeness in all its forms, whether in the place of illness, brokenness, loss, confusion, misguided allegiance or resurrection. They are singular, unusual, some might argue distant. But is that the experience of God for us?

I often reflect on the many, surprising ways God has been present in my own life. Often not in any way that I would expect. I may pray and in prayer ask God's wisdom, support and guidance through the complexities of everyday living, but God's answers are often not quite what I expect or hope for, they are surprising and always what I need rather than what I want.

Do you stop and reflect on how God works in your life? You might be tempted to say God does not, but that may just be because we haven't looked closely enough. It is amazing how often, when the conversation begins, we do recognise the work of God in our lives. How surprising it can be, wonderful even, though mostly undramatic and often quite simple. We may assume this is unusual, that is only because we don't talk about it or share our experiences. Is this because we think others may think us slightly do-lally, or we are fearful of ridicule, or we just don't realise how much God is doing in everyone's lives, even here and now.

As we break bread and share the common cup of the Eucharist, God is present, changing us, healing us, making us free. We may not always recognise it but occasionally, as that consecrated bread rests in our hand, as our hand is outstretched and offered, as we receive and are blessed in the receiving God is seen, known and shared. Our hearts are touched and our lives renewed, healed and made whole.

We may not see resurrections every day, we may not see people taking up beds and walking, we do see and experience and know of God's surprises in the world. They shouldn't be surprises I suppose, but they are and they are nice surprises too.