



## SERMON

There was a young man, deeply religious; whose desire to be accepted by God led him into monastic orders. His heart and mind were tortured by his sense of unworthiness and uncleanness. His question was – “how could a person abide God’s presence unless they themselves were holy?”

In monastic orders he strove to bring his humanness into complete humiliation in order to gain the favour of God. He would cast off the comfort of warm clothing in order to discipline his spirit and force him to focus beyond his desire for human comfort for which he felt guilty. In winter he would sleep on the boards of his cell floor without blankets, hoping to be humble enough to be acceptable to God.

He read Paul’s letters, searching them and wrestling with the way that Paul could write of law and grace in the same sentence. He saw only tension and contradiction in this, until one day when he was buried in Paul’s epistles straining for an answer – a breakthrough came when he yet again read “the just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17). In his own words, he suddenly “.....grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet.....this passage became to me a gate to heaven....” <sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther aged 30 in 1513 had been surprised by God and his soul was flooded with relief and joy with the beauty of God’s grace freely given in Christ and that discovery permanently changed his life.

In 1929 at aged 31, C.S.Lewis cast aside atheism because he had to admit that he was losing his intellectual struggle to understand the purpose of life and existence without acknowledgement of God. He writes that in his study, every time he lifted his thoughts away from his work, he felt the unrelenting approach of Him who he so earnestly desired not to meet!! He says that the “snow man had started to melt” and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Here I stand: A life of Martin Luther* by Roland Bainton; Mentor Books (1963) p 49

demand was simply “All” and he gave in and knelt and prayed – the most reluctant convert in all of England. He records all this in his book “*Surprised by Joy*”.

Lewis was surprised by God from whom he could not escape and to whom he knew he must surrender his all.<sup>2</sup>

One night in the winter of 1973, Charles Colson was at a friend’s having been invited to talk about his upcoming court case for his role in the corruption saga of Watergate. Colson was not a Christian but his friend was and to Colson’s surprise asked him to listen while he read to him the chapter on pride from C.S.Lewis’s book *Mere Christianity*. Colson was a proud man, self confident and self assured, fiercely ambitious and totally convinced in his own ability to achieve his goals, and now, all this was under threat of crumbling into a heap of public humiliation. Colson writes that in the moments it took for his friend to read the chapter, he saw himself as he never had before and the picture was ugly.

Driving away in the rain, Colson started weeping and pulled over. He prayed his first real prayer, praying that he would find God. Something inside him was urging him to surrender. He describes a cleansing feeling surging through his body and that his tears were somehow – tears of relief. Although in the dark by himself in his car for an hour, he says that he knew for the first time in his life that he was not alone.<sup>3</sup>

When Colson surrendered his pride he was surprised by God’s instant assurance within of relief and peace that replaced his anxiety and stress.

A common feature in these experiences is the element of surrender. Luther let go of the struggle to work for holiness and surrendered to God’s gift of grace.

Lewis surrendered the struggle of his intellect when he yielded to the realisation that there was a sublime and infinite intelligence outside of himself.

Colson surrendered his self sufficiency and pride, being broken with shame when he realised how ugly all that looked.

Surrender is not setting aside our uniqueness of character to become vacuous and facile. It is to loosen our hold on our uniqueness and character and yield these over to the one who gave them to us in the first place. And so when we surrender who and what we are to God with utmost humility and sincerity, God will surprise us.

God’s surprise will confront you with the truth about your life. It won’t be a present with a cute card – it will be a powerful revelation about the core of your life and it will open the door on your reality. It will take you to a place where you cannot hide. It won’t allow prevarication, hedging, half truth and manipulation around your world and who you are. It will anchor you in truth. It will ground you.

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<sup>2</sup> *Surprised by Joy* by C.S.Lewis; Collins (1981) p 182

<sup>3</sup> *Born Again* by Charles Colson; Chosen Books (1978) p116

Surrendering to God sounds scary because is counter intuitive to our human nature and we will resist it like C.S.Lewis did. But if we think for a moment about who we must surrender to, there is nothing to fear. Let God surprise you with His love. There is nothing to fear because God *is* love and perfect love casts out all fear (1 John 4:16-18). God's love wants only that our lives be filled with His peace and comfort, so don't be afraid to surrender. God will surprise you with His tender selflessness and you will be surprised by the servant heart of a God who has reached you. You will know what Jesus meant when He said "..... *The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Matt 20:28)

Surrendering to God will always be a blessing and God's surprises will always be beautiful. Look at the 3 people. Each one had a new song in their heart after being surprised by God! (Ps 40:3)

I remember being surprised by God one Sunday morning in 1991 when I was at Hamilton Cathedral. For some reason I was more intent than usual upon thinking about what I was saying as the service followed the form in the Prayer book. It began when we said the confession and I remember thinking that these words were expressing the place of my heart for me better than I could myself and I was caught up in the utter truth of what I was saying. This was a summary if my life.

*Merciful God,*

*We have sinned in what we have thought and said, In the wrong we have done and in the good we have not done.*

*We have sinned in ignorance, in weakness and through our own deliberate fault.*

*We are truly sorry and repent and turn to you.....* (Prayer Book p407)

I saw the beauty of confession which took me into true honesty about myself, that before God I could not ignore or hide the wrongs I had done nor turn a blind eye to the things I hadn't done or pretend that I didn't know what wrongs I'd committed. But even more, I was asking God to deal with those things that were beyond my understanding or that were done when my guard was down and unwittingly. What a beautiful thought, that God's grace would even cover the things I didn't know about – the things that I did not realise were unacceptable and ungodly. And I felt deeply grateful that I was seeing confession as an act of worship rather than a duty – a communication that was a sheer joy because it was welcomed lovingly.

And then hearing the priest say .....

*Through the Cross of Christ,*

*God have mercy on you, pardon you and set you free.*

*Know that you are forgiven and be at peace* (Prayer Book p408)

.....I remember being struck by the emphasis on *knowledge* that I was forgiven – that God’s forgiveness of me was a truth that was a vital reality of fact. It wasn’t just a theological idea or something remote to my daily life. I could take God’s forgiveness on board as hard data that I could utterly rely on as true. It was there to be known, and not just recited as a ritual of habit. Knowledge changes our behaviour, because knowledge makes something that might otherwise be only words or an idea, become true and real. I was at peace.

And then we said:

*Glory to you Lord Christ;  
Your death we show forth;  
Your resurrection we proclaim;  
Your coming we await;  
Amen ! Come Lord Jesus* (Prayer Book p 423)

.....and I felt as if these words were showing me that I was safely wrapped up in a perfect parcel of God’s intent for my life. First! Indeed to show forth Christ’s death is the explanation of how to live. What more need to be said. As Christ gave His life as a servant in sacrifice so too should we. We should show the sacrificial love of Christ by putting other’s interests ahead of our own and in this way we die to self. Christ’s death we show forth.

But then secondly, I saw how that Christ’s resurrection is at the centre of God’s purpose for humanity and creation. We have an undergirding excitement that explains how we can be so happy dying to self – we have a resurrection to proclaim. And thirdly I knew why we should be people of curious content in the complexities of life – it was because we have a hope that stabilises us. We await Christ’s return. No other faith or religion has this dimension of expectation.

In these 3 statements I saw a complete description of the purpose of God – to love as Christ loved, to embrace immortality and to live with patience and contentment through the human part of our journey.

That morning, I was surprised by God and swept away in the blessing and beauty of his tender touch.

Surrender to God this morning.

Expect to be surprised by God.