

CHRISTMAS DAY - According to Promise

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of December 1998.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled According to Promise and is from Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56.

I know what I'm getting for Christmas. I'm getting a book called The Victorians. It's snippets of people's lives in Victorian England in the 19th century.

And I know that I'm getting it for Christmas because I bought it. Now I'm not quite as sad as Mr Bean who buys presents for himself because nobody else does. But I bought it for my mother to give me for Christmas.

And that's not because she's stingy. She's given me the money for the book anyway. But my philosophy is minimize the surprise. Get what you want. Buy it yourself.

[1 : 08] What surprises will Christmas bring you this year? Oh, socks again. What a nice surprise. And that's what it says.

Oh no, not socks again. On the side of the socks a friend gave me for Christmas a few years ago.

One of my sisters asks us what we want for Christmas and what she should buy for us.

And we give her various suggestions. And usually then she doesn't buy them because she wants to give us a surprise. I tell her minimize the surprise. Get what you want. Buy it yourself.

Well, Christmas is full of surprises. And even when we least expect them. The story of Christmas is so familiar that we don't expect to find any surprises there.

Indeed, part of the appeal of the Christmas story is its familiarity, its lack of surprise. The appeal brings us the comfort of what is familiar. But the Christmas events are actually full of surprises.

[2 : 14] And the original Christmas was an enormous surprise, even though it was in effect long expected. For centuries leading up to the first Christmas, the people of God expected God to help them.

And when they were in difficulty, when their enemies were besieging them, they would cry out to God and expect him to help. And indeed, they built up the expectation in what is called the Old Testament part of the Bible, the bit written before Jesus came, that God would come finally to help and save his people.

In the Psalms in the Old Testament of the Bible, the writer of various Psalms often cries out to God for help and expects God to help and often expresses confidence that God would help even before he does come to the rescue.

When women were barren, unable to have children, they might cry out to God for help, as some women in the Old Testament did, and expect God to act and bring them the deliverance of having a child.

And as time went on in the Old Testament, whatever the situation of difficulty the people of God faced, there came the increasing expectation that God would send a final deliverer, a final king, a final judge, a final priest, a final prophet.

[3 : 32] The one who would finally and ultimately and totally rescue and deliver and save the people of God. A Messiah king, mighty, triumphant from God himself.

And at the time when Jesus was born, that expectation of a final deliverer was in some circles almost a fever pitch. People were looking out for a final deliverer from God, partly because the people of God were under Roman rule or oppression.

And under the binds of the Roman Empire, they cried out to God and looked for help and expected God to answer their cries.

I wonder whether you've ever come through the terminal at the airport and walked out to where the crowds of families and friends are awaiting their loved ones from a flight.

And often, of course, people recognise their family and friends. They go rushing up and embrace. Sometimes, of course, people hold up signs, Mr Bloggs. Presumably they don't remember what Mr Bloggs looked like or they've never met him before.

[4 : 42] I wonder whether you've ever had to wait for somebody at the airport not quite knowing who they are. Whether you've been given a description or maybe even a photo.

It's happened to me before. It's a bit nerve-wracking. Even when I've seen a photo of the person I've never met but I'm waiting for at the airport. I wonder whether your expectations were accurate at such a time.

Well, the announcement of the birth of the long-awaited saviour-deliverer from God is full of surprise. The people were full of expectation over centuries but their expectations did not quite meet what arrived.

There are surprising circumstances in Jesus' coming and a surprising purpose in Jesus' coming. The circumstances were surprising. Firstly, Mary.

Well, no princess. A little rural, perhaps country bumpkin of a girl. Unwed. Bit of a scandal, really, that she was going to have a baby. Imagine what Joseph thought.

[5 : 49] Who's she been sleeping with lately? Clouds over Jesus' legitimacy. What a surprise that such an obscure girl would become the bearer of Jesus, the saviour from God.

A Bethlehem manger full of the filth of smelly hay and animals. Not the way you expect God to enter the world. The shepherds.

In Jesus' day, often little more than vagabonds. Perhaps a bit like the gangs that we might expect down the dark alleys of the inner city of Melbourne these days. Which mother giving birth to a baby would welcome such vagabonds and ruffians into a stable?

Keep away from my baby, surely. What surprising visitors they would have been. But even the wise men. We often think of them as kings. You might think, well, that's a bit nicer. But imagine all these foreigners come along speaking a language that you don't speak other than Aramaic and they all look like Osama bin Laden.

I'm not sure that you'd welcome them into a stable either to welcome your little baby. Mary, the manger, the men, the magi. Christmas is full of surprising things in its circumstances.

[7 : 01] You don't always get what you expect when God says he's going to send his final deliverer. What a surprise. But just as surprising as the circumstances, so too the surprising purpose of Christmas.

And Mary's song when she was told that she was going to bear the baby, Jesus Christ, captures it well. As we heard in the first reading today, as we sang in the second of the songs that we've sung. God comes to reverse the fortunes of people. What a surprising thing for God to do. We're told in that song of Mary that God will come, God's saviour will come, the baby that she's about to bear will come.

To scatter the proud. To bring down the powerful. To lift up the lowly. To fill the hungry. But to send the rich away empty.

That's a surprise. We ought not to expect that of the final deliverer from God to save God's people. Jesus, you see, came to unseat and unsettle.

[8 : 09] And that comforting and comfortable story of the baby of Bethlehem is really a surprise. You see, by and large, the world puts up do not disturb signs.

We're happy enough with life. But God doesn't pay attention to them. He came to unseat and unsettle. The feathers of life are ruffled. The rugs of pride pulled out from under the feet.

You see, the comforting story of Christmas is not simply so comfortable. Because Jesus the baby came to unseat and unsettle.

To surprise the rich, the powerful and the proud. God came in Jesus Christ with surprises for those who are rich.

Surprises for those who are proud. Surprises for those who are powerful as well. And before we think, oh yes, but that's about all those other people. Those proud and rich and arrogant Pharisees, for example.

[9 : 09] Beware we think like that. Because Christmas comes to unseat and unsettle and surprise us too. See, we're proud people.

In our society, pride's a virtue. We're encouraged to be proud. We're encouraged to be proud in our achievements. Proud about our family. Proud about who we are. Even if it's a social minority group.

We have pride marches for various things. Pride is a virtue. It's good to be self-sufficient and independent. And so pride breeds smug complacency. And we're powerful people. Maybe not individually, but we're Westerners in the end of the, or the beginning of the 21st century. And we're middle class mainly. We're powerful people in our world. We have a vote. We have a say. We have some influence.

And we're rich. Maybe not each and every individual, but as a generation, we're the wealthiest generation that's ever lived in the world. So beware the surprise of Christmas.

[10:11] Because Jesus came to unseat and unsettle the proud, the powerful, and the rich, and us. And Mary's song and the message of Christmas urges us in response to Christmas, in response to Jesus and to God, be lowly and humble.

Dependent and reliant on God. That's often a great stumbling block for people to become Christians. They may have a veneer of religiosity in their life. They may be comfortable singing Christmas carols, even comfortable occasionally attending church.

But humble, lowly dependence and reliance on God is a big step for people to make in our day and age. We don't like to be dependent on anyone. You see it in rebellious teenagers not wanting to be dependent on their parents.

And you see it in those who are getting old and frail, who are fiercely independent. But our reliance on God is because we cannot save ourselves.

We need a saviour. We can't do it ourselves. And we can only ever be saved when we're humble and lowly and reliant on God.

[11:27] And Mary's song urges us also to be weak and poor. Not necessarily to empty our pockets and throw it away. But to acknowledge, at least spiritually, our bankruptcy before God.

We have no spiritual investments that warrant God's attention. We have no great spiritual claims on God at all. Our hands are empty.

We're spiritually bankrupt. And we need God's mercy. Not mercy by right. But mercy by grace. Mary understood the surprise of Christmas.

Her song captures it brilliantly. The expectation of God coming to unseat and unsettle. But also her lowly and humble, weak and poor response to God. Empty handed, open handed to receive the gift of salvation.

For Jesus was her saviour too, remember. And the child she bore also knew the same unsettling, unseating nature of Christmas.

[12:34] As we've just sung, though he was rich beyond all splendour, yet for love's sake became so poor. Leaving his throne in glad surrender, sapphire paved courts for a stable floor.

Or indeed, as the third of our Bible readings tonight said, that Jesus counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

Taking the form of a servant, literally a slave. And he humbled himself. Becoming obedient, even to death, death on a cross.

Christmas is the surprising gift of God. Not for those who rely on their own resources or their own righteousness. But for those who are lowly, humble, weak and poor.

For those who are like what Jesus became. And the gift of Christmas? Well, following Jesus' own life, as we heard in that final reading.

[13:44] The humble one, obedient even to death on the cross, whom then God exalted to the highest place. So the gift is offered to us too. That as Jesus the humble one was lifted to the highest place, So those who accept him humbly will be lifted up to heaven.

To a glorious eternity in God's paradise. You are our God beyond all praising. Yet for love's sake became a man.

Stooping so low, but sinners raising heavenwards by your eternal plan. That is the gift. Of God to us at Christmas.

To ultimately lift us to heaven. To the glorious paradise that is not ours by right. But by God's grace and mercy. Not because we deserve it.

For we don't. A surprising gift indeed. Don't let Christmas confirm you in your comfort. Let it surprise you in your spirit.

[14:53] And may the best surprise that Christmas brings you this year. Be the humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation. In Jesus Christ.

Amen.