

St Barnabas: 25 June 2017 (2 Sunday after Trinity)

The God of Surprises by Sue Gillingham

God of Surprises was the name of a book which appeared in the 1980s, written by a Jesuit priest called Gerard Hughes : it became a Christian Classic, and sold well over 50,000 copies. It's been reprinted several times since. He wrote it for 'bewildered, confused or disillusioned Christians' and the book speaks of the ways in which God can break into our hearts and minds with a fresh vision of himself. Gerard Hughes argues that we need to abandon our false images of God as 'good old Uncle George' who gives us what we want just when we want it: it's 'a loving book', challenging our Christian apathy, and making us face positively in our Christian pilgrimage moments of doubt and weakness.

This emphasis on a 'God who Surprises' is most appropriate today, for it's a clear theme in two of our Bible readings. In both Genesis 12 and Luke 14 we find an element of surprise: God is not 'good old uncle George' in *our* control, for he constantly makes unexpected choices. His ways are not our ways. His plans for our wellbeing can come as a surprise.

We begin with the story we heard from Genesis 12, which is about Abraham's first encounter with God: 'Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great..."'

We know little about Abraham before this point: we are given no indication why *Abraham* was singled out by God to become the 'father of a great nation'. All we know is that he had lived in a place near Babylon, in present day Iraq, in a wealthy and polytheistic city called Ur, and then his father, Terah, migrated northwards to a place later called Haran, in modern day Syria. We also know that Abraham had a nephew called Lot, and a wife called Sarah, and she was barren. It was in Haran, so Genesis informs us, that God first speaks to Abraham. We know nothing of what Abraham thought about this: the key character in our reading was God. All we know is that Abraham left Haran, moved to Canaan (the land God had spoken about, the land we now know as 'Israel/Palestine') but from there he went down to Egypt and then travelled back and forth to Canaan. His journeys seem to mirror the later story of the entire Israelite people, for they too were immigrants in Egypt, in Babylon, and spent some time settling in Canaan itself. The next twelve chapters of Genesis narrate the ups and downs of Abraham's journeying - and like the later people

of Israel, his is not only on an outward and physical journey, but it's a spiritual and inward journey as well.

Over the last two weeks I have been our Faculty's examiner in Old Testament, and I have marked some fifty scripts by first years whose set texts were the stories of Abraham in Genesis 12-25. So recently I have thought a good deal about these chapters, and I have read a good deal about what first year students think they might mean. So I confess that by this Sunday I have my own 'take' on the Abraham story. And my picture of both Abraham and Sarah is of two very human, indeed quite flawed characters; they are little different from Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3, little different from the later people of Israel, and little different from us. Yet God keeps reiterating his promise to Abraham and also to Sarah. Even despite their sometimes taking the law into their own hands – for example, trying to produce an heir through Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave; the child born was called Ishmael. Still God keeps intervening and even sends angelic messengers to explain that the promise of 'descendants' will be fulfilled through a child, called Isaac, who will be born to them in their old age. We are told that Sarah laughs at this; the irony is that the name Isaac means 'laughter'.

Why then is Abraham known for *his 'faith'* in God? Perhaps because of the way the while story ends, when God gives him what seems to us to be an outrageous test. When Isaac is still a child, God tells Abraham to take him to Mount Moriah, a high hill in Jerusalem where the Temple was later built, and, emulating the much condemned practices of pagan peoples, he is required to offer him up as a human sacrifice. The story is full of drama as the God of surprises puts Abraham to the test; at the last moment a ram is found and this is sacrificed instead. So here Abraham has shown his faith: an ability to trust God in the most awful circumstances, yet at the end of the story Isaac is free and the promise of land and descendants is upheld. The God of surprises frequently puts his people to the test: it's a very awkward part of our faith, as later Old Testament heroes such as Job, Jeremiah and Daniel experienced as well.

Yet Abraham became, through Isaac, the father of faith for the Jewish people, as they saw the promises once given to Abraham were fulfilled in later times. In addition, Abraham also became the father of the Christian people, for being prepared to sacrifice a son (and in Jerusalem, too) he foreshadowed the essence of Christian faith, where God too is prepared to sacrifice his own only son on Calvary. So Abraham is frequently mentioned in Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews, as an example of faith, not knowing anything definite about his future, but believing that God would somehow work things out. Finally, through the line of Sarah's slave girl Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, Abraham also becomes the father of faith for all Moslems, for

through *this son*, Ishmael, also born of Abraham God *also* promised land and descendants: it's there in the stories of Genesis, too.

So God can do great and unexpected things from small and surprising beginnings. His ways are greater than our ways.

But a 'God of Surprises' isn't only about Abraham. Isn't this what the entire story of the Bible is actually about? Is it not repeatedly about the way that God always transforms fragile humanity and uses it for his purposes? Think of the story of Joseph, sold by his jealous brothers into slavery in Egypt, from where he could rise to a position of power in order to save his own people at a time of critical famine... Think of Moses, a Hebrew, but brought up in Pharaoh's court as an Egyptian, and yet the one through whom the people escaped from slavery in Egypt... Think of David, the shepherd boy who killed the giant Goliath, who then became King of Israel... The same story, of God transforming fragile humanity, runs through the New Testament, too. Think of the fisherman Peter who followed Jesus and then denied him as he was about to die, but became the Rock on which Christ promised to build his church; and think of the Apostle Paul, once a tentmaker, and a well-educated Jew who persecuted the early Christians, yet who later met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and who then became one of the first real missionaries of the Christian faith. The Bible is full of stories of the God who performs the unexpected through his people.

The New Testament, which actually starts by telling us about the birth of a carpenter's son, born of a Virgin, is undoubtedly a book about a God who *surprises*. I am reminded of a thought-provoking reflection on the surprising life of Christ, written in the 1920s by James Francis. Its title is 'One Solitary Life':

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never more than travelled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through

the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centrepiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

And yet all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

This puts our New Testament reading into context. It comes from Luke 14, and in the chapters before this we read of how the religious leaders increasingly began to oppose Jesus: they wanted a God they could control, a God who fitted in with their traditions and their ways of thinking, but Jesus' life and teaching was so unexpected. The parable we heard as our Gospel reading is the epitome of what they found so difficult about Jesus. It is about a rich ruler who decides to have a great party, but everyone he invites makes excuses and declines to come, so instead this ruler invites into his home those who would least expect to come to any party - 'the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame'. The parable ends with the ruler saying: '*None* of those who *were* invited shall taste my dinner'. Parables always have inner meanings, and it is not difficult to see what Jesus is telling us here. The ruler is of course God himself: the cause of celebration is the coming of Christ, with his message of Good News for all people. Those initially invited are the typical religious people of his day: but they find the cause of celebration threatening, and do not want to be associated with it, so refuse to come. So who were invited instead? Those who had no previous conceptions of who God was. These were the ones who were invited to 'taste God's dinner'. So as we celebrate the Eucharist this morning, let us recognise that we too are the ones who have been invited to eat and drink in the memory of God's Last Supper: but even now let us be prepared to be surprised by God, as well.

It is not always easy to respond to of a God who surprises us. It was hard for Abraham: it was hard for those religious leaders who heard the parable of Jesus about the invitation to a banquet. And today it is especially hard for us, because there are so many competing voices announcing that God is on their side, whom we hear so frequently on radio, television and social media: many fundamentalist religious people today - of all faiths - claim

they have heard God speak, even though their actions communicate little of what we know from the Bible about the nature and purpose of God.

So how do we listen to God and know that he is speaking to us? As Gerard Hughes tells us, we can start by assuming we are not talking to 'good old Uncle George': we have to be prepared to listen before we speak, for we cannot change God: he changes us. We have to be prepared to be surprised as we encounter this sovereign God, who in the form of the Trinity comes to us as our Creator, Saviour, and Sustainer. This idea of encountering God in unexpected ways is expressed in a moving nineteenth century hymn by William Cowper. The story behind this hymn is that it was composed after the depressed Cowper, determined to drown himself in the river Thames, was taken there by a cab-driver, but a thick fog prevented them reaching the river and Cowper had to get out and walk, only to find he was back on his own doorstep. God can surprise us in the way he can protect us. The hymn runs like this:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

To be prepared to be surprised by God is not about blind faith: it is a way of being constantly open to his presence. This can be in the privacy of our own home; it can be walking in the country or by the sea, communing with God in the open; or it can be in moments like today, when we can encounter God through the liturgy and sacraments of the church. // Perhaps the best way of summarising our faith in the God of Surprises is found in the reflections of a nineteenth century Confederate Soldier:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might humbly learn to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do great things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do greater things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I got nothing I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
So I am, amongst all people, most richly blessed.

Amen.