

I have spent much of my life trying to understand God and how God works in our lives. As a teacher and priest I have encouraged others to do the same and hoped to help a little. I was once stunned by a four-year-old sitting in the front row of chapel for Kindergarten to Grade 2 who burst out with a question 'What is God?' It was an urgent enquiry and not a place for complex and labyrinthine explication on the divine. But it demanded a response, not only for the child himself but for the others, already alert to the question. I said 'God is everywhere, and God loves you.' Despite its inadequacy, it seemed satisfactory in a context where God was rarely, if ever, part of the family discourse. The question came as a surprise and I needed God to guide me, with little conscious thought, towards an answer that made sense.

Do you like surprises? I know people who get very angry if someone springs a surprise on them and others who delight in the unexpected, an opportunity for unalloyed joy.

One of the most formative books I recall reading in my more mature struggle with the same question was *God of Surprises* by the Jesuit Gerard W Hughes, published in the mid 1980s. Some of you will know it. Re-reading it, it feels a little dated but its truth is beyond the limits of time and place.

Initially, people imagine the title implies that God is the source and initiator of all surprises, and I don't intend to go down that path again of the interventionist, causative God, having done so a couple of weeks ago. Suffice it to say that my memory of this book lies in the truth that God is with us, not just in surprises but in all things. That promised presence is how God works within us amid the surprises of life. Hughes, using the Ignatian spiritual exercises, teaches us that the treasure we seek is hidden in a field, a field within us, but we need to know where to look and how to dig.

By their nature, we don't know about surprises until they strike us. Some, we know, we can well do without. Others bring joy and blessing. That little hymn that doesn't get much of a run these days seems to cover all options.

*Sometimes a light surprises The Christian while he sings;  
It is the Lord who rises With healing in His wings;  
When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again  
A season of clear shining, To cheer it after rain.*

God, the light of Christ, is the treasure we seek in all our wanderings. It will illuminate those epiphanies, moments of God's presence that bring us even closer, almost by surprise, to the God whose love never fades nor fails. Then in those darkest moments of shattering surprise, we find the light shining through, breaking even the deepest darkness.

And these phenomena are nothing new. Abraham continues to have faith, and in time, he is surprised by the promise not just of his own son and heir, but of a multitude of descendants as many as there are stars in the sky. The Psalmist and the writer of Hebrews remind us of the constancy of God, where faith is the key, as we hear *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*.

What we hope for, what we do not see. Not certainties, but treasure hidden in the deep field of ourselves, if we know where to look and how to dig.

But our gospel takes us to where our treasure is - where our heart is; so if we have a heart of faith, we are more likely muddle through, or even flourish. And, if your experience is anything like mine, that is how God will surprise us. Hear again the urging of Jesus in Luke:

Be dressed for action; be alert; be ready.

A clear message if ever there was one. And one which emphasises how best to encounter surprises. That is to do what should be the constant work of every Christian, the cultivation of a state of being, a heart and mind that are tilled, nourished and watered by immersion in, submission to the presence of God.

Luke does not suggest sitting down, twiddling our thumbs and waiting for someone up there to do something. The circumstances that are our daily experience need us to be as fit as we can to run with the challenges and to bask in the joy. And that means work, rolling up our sleeves and getting stuck in.

This is the third time we have been here to Christ Church and we love dearly the people we have met and the community it is. And we sense the impact of surprises that have challenged you over these last couple of years.

Covid is an obvious one which has hit people the world over, often with devastating impact not only to health but to a sense of confidence, of livelihood and patterns of being. It has been tough for young people whose schooling has been turned upside down, for parents coping with that, workers who have had to manage different ways of doing their jobs. Front-line people in health and aged care have been overloaded. It has shattered our sense of certainty.

And in the church, where we have had to learn how to worship in profoundly different ways. You may know that we were leading worship for Holy Trinity Geneva for most of a year from our home in Australia. And it worked, we held on, but it doesn't replace this; there is no substitute for being together.

And then the loss of your Chaplain, Christine was another surprise that has unsettled this community. But the only answer I have is to remind you that response lies within you. There is work to do, certainly for your wardens and Council, but for everyone - strengthening our faith and trust in God's future and building a strong community through active work (prayer, too, is work!) along with intentional engagement and all working as one, united in diversity and purpose.

Yesterday was the feast of the Transfiguration where Jesus takes Peter, John and James up a high mountain and there they are surprised by the change they witness as Jesus is transfigured, transformed into a different and shining likeness. It is for them a huge surprise. How might this happen? It is simply a coincidence that they are there when the cloud passes and an aura of unnatural brilliance passes over their Lord, our Lord?

Well, I think not. They have spent much time in his company, listening, asking questions, praying; doing the work of a disciple, a follower. They are attuned to something beyond the normal when earth and heaven touch, when the light of God comes so very close that it dazzles, disorients but leaves no doubt that we are infused with the divine.

Beyond all sense, we set aside any rational explanation, but exclaim 'It is good to be here'.

Let me encourage you to do the exercise, to attune yourself to where God may be now, so that when you trip over him in the weeks and months ahead, he does not escape your notice. Do the work which allows God to work in you and through you

I promise you, you will be surprised.