

CAROL SERVICE 2016: The Unexpected Visitor (Gen 3, Isaiah 7)

Christmas is a time for visitors, isn't it? Many of you may be receiving visitors over the next couple of weeks. Many of you may be visitors to others. Some will be both, the visitors and the visited. We're usually more comfortable when the visits are expected. We can tidy the house or flat, re-hang that picture on the wall we've left against the skirting board for the last few weeks waiting to do it. We might put on our best clothes. We might even temporarily remove some inconvenient family members, sending them out to the shops or the park (I can't believe any of you do that.)

Unexpected visitors present a particular challenge, don't they? We have to receive them not only as *they* are but as *we* are. Interestingly, children's stories are full of unexpected visits. Whether it's Goldilocks, or the wolf in The 3 Little Pigs, or the witch in Sleeping Beauty or even the Tiger Who Came to Tea, we fill our children's stories full of something we don't generally like as adults: unexpected visitors. Even Prince Harry has been getting a bit of stick recently for his unexpected visits to his girlfriend, breaking royal protocols.

The Christmas story is, at its heart, the story of another royal visit. Perhaps also one which arguably breaks our notions of expected royal protocols. But I wonder how you would answer this question: *is Jesus an expected or an unexpected visitor?* I imagine many of you would answer that question by saying he's expected. After all we know when Christmas is every year: 25th December without fail (although **someone/David** reminded me earlier that most scholars reckon Christmas was probably late September or early October, but we won't dwell on that. **We're not singing 'In the bleak midwinter' today, so it's OK**).

Most of us also know the story. The angel appears to Mary who's dressed in blue, she travels on a donkey with Joseph to Bethlehem, gives birth serenely in a stable lying a silent Jesus on a soft bed of hay, then some more angels tell the shepherds to take a look, and then the wise men arrive on camels just a few minutes after the shepherds to make our beautiful rustic tableau. Ta daaa!

It's so familiar. So familiar that we miss all the surprises. Mary was *not* expecting the angel. Joseph was *not* expecting his fiancée to get pregnant. The aged cousin Elizabeth was also *not* expecting a miracle baby. *No-one* was expecting a summons to their home town, especially not for Joseph just as his missus was heavily pregnant. They *weren't* expecting to find no accommodation, nor a bunch of local toughs to visit them in the dead of night (would you want that straight after giving birth?), nor indeed a visit from some Iranian intellectuals a few months later. Yes, the Messiah had been promised dozens of times in their scriptures, but that was hundreds of years ago: no-one knew *when* or exactly *how* it would happen. God broke in unexpectedly.

God often does. Take Adam and Eve for example in our first reading (Genesis ch3). They've just broken the only commandment they were given, made the first pair of pants and who should turn up for an evening walk in the garden but their Creator? 'The Lord God was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.' Expected or unexpected? I suspect God was in the habit of enjoying a stroll in his beautiful world, but I doubt Adam and Eve were ready for *that* stroll on *that* day.

The story in Genesis 3 reminds us that from the beginning of time, God is not absent from his world. His plan was always to be closely connected with it. Jesus was not a change of plan, but the renewal of an old plan, the original plan, one that was working perfectly well until we humans ruined it. But it was not the only time that God broke in.

God has a habit of making unexpected visits. Abraham was minding his business in Genesis 18 when 3 visitors arrived, divine messengers whom Abraham unexpectedly hosted.

The 80-year-old Moses was tending his sheep in the wild country when he saw a bush on fire which wasn't burning. God made another unexpected visit.

Gideon was hiding in the winepress when the angel appeared and gave him a divine commission.

The boy Samuel was tucking in for the night when God called him: he was so surprised he thought it was his boss Eli.

Again and again God breaks in – the unexpected visitor to the world He made. Most of the people weren't exactly ready: we rarely are. Moses and Gideon both needed signs to be sure, Samuel woke Eli up 3 times, Abraham's wife Sarah laughed at the idea she would have a son: that's why when he came he was called Laughter (that's what Isaac means). But God came anyway. In fact, all He ever really needed were good hearts to dwell in. The clean furniture, tidy house, level of education, general prosperity of family or nation didn't really matter too much to him. No, *it was about the heart, the spirit.* These people were all ready, even if they didn't *think* they were.

So again and again, God visits. He breaks in to our world. He surprises people. Eventually the Jewish prophets started to speak of a time when he would do it decisively. There are dozens of such prophecies, but to quote one, which we didn't read today, from Isaiah 7: 'The virgin will give birth to a son and he will be called Emmanuel.' Emmanuel means 'God with us.' The visit was coming. That was 700 years before Jesus, so the party invite took a while to be fulfilled: but fulfilled it was.

Was it expected, or unexpected? Is it expected or unexpected tonight? The nativity is not just a religious fairy story, it is *the* story of all time. The story which began with the early humans and is still being told now. **The story of a God who breaks into our world and keeps breaking in: the expected, unexpected visitor.**

Maybe God is walking around here this evening in the cool of the day. Perhaps we too can catch his voice, to hear his invitation: **'Where are you?'** And you might be thinking: God, you know exactly where I am. But the question is not one of physical location. God knew exactly where Adam and Eve were: he's God. Their hiding was not physical, but emotional and spiritual.

Where *are* you? That's a question many of us may have asked God. Faced with suffering of some sort, or seeing evil and injustice in the world, we might well have asked that very question of God: where are you? And God doesn't mind being asked. He's not a remote tyrant who can't tolerate our questions.

But perhaps fewer of us have realised that God also asks that question too, of us: where are *you*? I made you, I love you, I designed you to be complete only in relationship with me. I'm here, I always have been, I will always be with you, just like I promised in Isaiah... where are you?

Maybe that's a question for some of us to take away tonight. Perhaps this Christmas it's time to face that question personally. We love the carols, we love the story, we love the traditions. The Christmas story breaks in, *as expected*, for a week or two every year; and leaves, as expected, just like all the others relatives and friends. But this year, maybe God is the unexpected visitor. One who stays, maybe who turns everything upside down: but only for the better.

The Christmas story is full of questions – many of them are familiar to us: How will this be, since I am a virgin? Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

I'll leave you with one less well known, but most important of all. A question not from the humans in the story but from God: 'Where are you?'

Are you ready for the unexpected visitor? Do you want to be? If visits you in the cool of the day today, how will you answer?