

## **St. Marks – Carol Service 2019**

Wow - that was some result wasn't it? Who would have imagined they would have won?

I mean Strictly can be unpredictable, but that was surprising.

Now of course I'm playing with you. And don't worry if you've got Strictly recorded I'm not going to give a spoiler! The last few weeks have been weird haven't they? The last General Election not in April, May or June took place when I was 5, so political campaigning in December when we're all gearing up for Christmas is really odd isn't it? When I'm thinking about services here and what presents to get, I really am not wanting that interrupted by campaign leaflets. But you know what, there is a strange similarity between this year and that first Christmas in Bethlehem. Because Mary and Joseph only travelled to Bethlehem because the political

bigwigs at the time wanted a census done, and everyone had to go back to their home town to register. And for Joseph that meant Bethlehem. Politicians interfering with well laid plans 2000 years ago, and now! Yet still no one in our country ever really thought a December General election was likely, and the theme of surprise runs through my talk tonight!

Now I really struggle buying presents for my wife Fi. I do think its easy buying presents for men - socks, deodorants, shower gel - well that's what I get anyway - but ladies presents... well I always feel it's a bit of a minefield. Whether it's the wrong colour, the wrong style or the wrong smell, it's so easy to get it wrong. Now recently I read that surveys consistently show that most ladies don't want the predictable gift, most really want a Christmas surprise. Or a "Surprise, surprise" as Cilla Black might have put it. Now men if you really grasp this you're on to a winner every year, because

there's so much scope for imagination: I mean how much more surprising could you get than buying your wife or girlfriend or mother or even the mother-in-law for that matter, a sink plunger - or how about getting them a "Teach yourself Swahili Book" - or what about a tin helmet? Ladies not agreeing? No - I suspect not - if I bought Fi a tin helmet for Christmas I might need to wear it for the rest of the day...outside. Again I'm joking. But now I've got you thinking of surprises.

Have you ever looked at the story of the first Christmas from the angle of surprise? Because frankly everything about what happened, was surprising.

Consider Mary. She was only a teenager, engaged to be married to Joseph the carpenter. That was a steady profession and he was a good man, so their future looked nicely planned out. But then Mary was visited by an Angel and boy did Angel Gabriel have a surprise for

her! This young lady, a virgin, would have a child, God's own Son, and He would be called Jesus. And this child would be the Saviour of the human race. That's some surprise! I wonder how did Mary feel? Nervous, perhaps anxious, excited or fearful - we don't know. But what we do know is that she was willing to go along with God's plan and that too is frankly surprising because Mary accepted that her whole world was going to be turned upside down. I wonder would we be willing to let go of our plans and embrace God's ideas? But praise God that Mary was obedient to God's plans, and very soon Mary *was* carrying Jesus in her womb.

But if Mary was surprised, how must her fiancé Joseph have taken the news his fiancé was pregnant?

The head of education at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge once spoke about something which had happened when a group of primary school children visited the museum. He said "We were studying a

picture of the Nativity and I asked the children to look at Joseph's face and tell me what he was thinking. One little boy replied, "I know what my dad would be thinking if he'd been told that his wife was having someone else's baby!"

Indeed! Poor Joseph must have struggled with this unwelcome surprise - it's likely he just didn't believe Mary's words. An angel visited his wife and she would give birth to the Saviour? Come off it - babies weren't conceived that way. In fact, in a passage in Matthew's Gospel we learn that he hadn't taken this news well at all - for we are told he had decided to divorce her quietly. But now it was time for Joseph to experience his own personal surprise - he too is visited by an angel, this time in a dream - and following the angel's reassurances, his mind is set at rest. And Joseph stood by Mary and raised Jesus, God's Son as his own.

*PAUSE*

And then there were the shepherds quietly minding

their own business one night in the hills, tending their sheep. Shepherds were the lowest of the low in Jewish society, widely despised and deemed untrustworthy. If you wanted a credible witness you wouldn't call a shepherd. But amazingly God chose the shepherds, the forgotten downtrodden people, to be the first to see the Saviour. Imagine the surprise of the shepherds when an angel visited them with the most incredible news:

**“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David [that is Bethlehem] a Saviour has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.”**

And if that surprise wasn't great enough, they were then serenaded by countless angels. That angels would come to lowly shepherds, and with such wonderful news - amazing! But it was all true. The shepherds saw it with their own eyes and told everyone about the birth of the Saviour.

Surprise, after surprise, after surprise that first Christmas!

But still today for us the Good News of Christmas Day seems surprising, amazing, frankly incredible. That God would make himself so weak and so vulnerable - that Jesus would be born just like we are and in a stable too.

Several years ago at a Christmas Day family service in Worthing, a vicar went to one of the mums in the congregation who had recently had a baby, and who was sitting near the front. She carefully passed him the child, well wrapped up. The vicar then walked back to the front with the baby to make his point, but as he entered the sanctuary he missed his footing, tripped and dropped him to the floor! There were gasps of horror! But unbeknown to the congregation, a few minutes beforehand the mother had taken her baby out and come back with a doll. And the vicar had deliberately

dropped the doll. His point was everyone knows that you mustn't drop babies - they're too fragile. But that's how vulnerable God made himself for us as He came to earth as the newborn Jesus.

Surprising - absolutely. But God doesn't do the things humankind expects - He does it better. Jesus came, born as one of us, to live a human life, that we might have a Saviour who knows exactly what our life is like. And he was born to a poor family too, in a manger - no privileges for God's own. Jesus came that we might know Him and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour. And that fragile baby boy grew up to be a man who as the divine Son of God revealed through his actions and teachings how we should live. And though innocent he died for us, taking all the bad things of humanity upon his body though he himself was without sin. Then in the biggest surprise of all, 2 days later Jesus was resurrected

so that all who trust in Him may find a new life in relationship with the Lord.

So this Christmas let's not leave Jesus, cute and cuddly, in the manger, but let's embrace the salvation he offers us all. And as the angels encouraged the shepherds in the words of our next carol, let us:

*Come and worship,  
Worship Christ the new born King.*