



**Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2025**

**Readings:** *Verses from Isaiah 35; Luke 2: 46 -55*

**Advent II** – service led by the Children’s Ministry Team

“Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth”<sup>1</sup> was not an imperial warrior and his armies swallowing up kingdoms, nor a great philosopher debating deep questions about existence and mind; not a convocation of world leaders or even of world religious leaders.

“God surprises earth with heaven coming here on Christmas Day”: heaven - coming here - on earth, but in so unlikely a way that the wisdom of men would never see it, only the heralding angels. Yet on that day, in that place, heaven did come on earth. All its features were there: the love, the grace of God for his creation; the willing acceptance of God’s call by the few people to whom that call came; the awe that accompanies the wonder of new life - especially this new life - this “holy, helpless thing”; and the hope and joy of those who were able to see and share the wonder of it.

Yes, “God *surprises* earth with heaven.” God is a *God of Surprises*, as the title of a book by Gerard Hughes put it. God surprised Mary, a young woman very conscious of her unimportance in the world’s eyes, but she accepted his gift of grace – though also of heavy responsibility – with simple trust. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then there was Joseph, an ordinary working man - a good man - surprised - shocked ! by news that turned his own life-plans upside down. Preparing to deal with it according to the law he, too, was challenged by an angel, this time in a dream, who delivered the divine message that made him devote his life to the support, love and care of Mary and her son. God’s surprises can be challenging and life-changing, but they are also life-affirming and joyous to those who freely accept them, in faith, so that God’s will may be done.

It wasn’t easy, especially when the earthly power of the Roman Emperor came into play. From Nazareth to Bethlehem is about sixty-nine miles by a fast road, but there were no fast roads for Joseph and Mary, walking the steep paths on foot unless, perhaps, Mary sometimes rode a donkey. The journey could well have taken them nearly a week only to find, on arrival, that Bethlehem was filled to overflowing by others forced into sudden travel the by the same Roman decree. Finally, having at last found some shelter, though without any of the careful preparations Mary would have made back home, her birth pangs take over; and a child is born and laid “in a manger for a bed”. As Psalm 30 puts it: “*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. . . . so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.*” God did, indeed, surprise earth with heaven coming here on Christmas Day.

But it would take time for the this “dawn from on high” to grow into the Light that can guide our feet into the way of peace, and would involve more surprises for those who were able to see and recognize it. Jesus himself, growing up in the home of Mary and Joseph would have learned love and recognized it wherever he saw it at work, but he would have seen, too, that it could involve sacrifice. As a boy he would have been taught to read and understand the Scriptures, but his understanding of them, his interpretation, would later surprise and challenge or shock many who saw and heard him.

One of them was John the Baptist. He saw Jesus. He experienced the surprise revelation that this young cousin of his was the expected Messiah, the anointed One written of in those Scriptures. Yet even for him this realization was not followed by what he expected. He was driven to sending his own disciples to ask Jesus, “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” “*Go and tell John,*” replied Jesus, “what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, the lame

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<sup>1</sup> “Who would think that that what was needed”. Hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule.

walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them". God's way is not man's way. God surprises earth with heaven - loving, seeking, healing and forgiving.

Then there was Nicodemus, the Pharisee, the learned debater and interpreter of the Scriptures.

He came to Jesus by night, to tempt him with questions but Jesus refused the bait. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He cannot *see* it. He cannot see the loving, seeking and healing that is the sign of the kingdom, the rule of God.

"How can a man be born again?" said Nicodemus. That's ridiculous – it's nonsense. But Jesus knew that Nicodemus would never see God's kingdom on earth unless he could forget what he had always "taken for granted"- the way things were – the way society functioned – rich and poor, slave and free, learned and ignorant, ruler and ruled. He must look with fresh eyes – like a child. He must work it out for himself, see where the Spirit of God was at work – the rule - the kingdom – where God's will is done on earth. Or, as Jesus said to another Pharisee: "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Not fasts and rituals but the knowledge, the surprising - the astonishing - revelation of healing, of hope, of new life in the love and grace of God.

Perhaps that is a thought we might all take away from the children's retelling today of the story of Christmas - to look with refreshed eyes and always be ready to see where God is at work. As Isaiah wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the

Lord. "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, *do you not perceive it?*" May God bless us this Christmas with surprises and clear eyes to see them as they are – gifts, messages, perhaps challenges from God.

May he bless us with wisdom and courage in responding, and with the Joy that passes all human understanding. Amen.

*Janet Bottoms: 14<sup>th</sup> December 2025*