

Second Sunday after Epiphany - Rev'd Dr. Timothy Gaden - Sunday 18 January 2009

Texts: 1 Sam 3:1-10, 1 Cor 6:12-20, John 1:43-51

I have two small children, so I spend a fair amount of my time being a parent.

Looking around, I see that some of you are in the same boat. Many of you are finished with parenting, although I guess that some are now doing it for the second time, as grandparents. But whether you are, like me, in the middle of parenting, finished, or doing it for the second (or third!) time, you will know that one of the most remarkable things about children is their capacity for wonder, for being surprised.

In my case, Mollie, our youngest, gave herself quite a surprise just after she learnt to stand upright. She pulled herself up and pushed every button she could find on the front of the video recorder. By chance she hit the eject button and was rewarded with a videotape leaping out and hitting her in the forehead. That was a memorable surprise for her and for us.

Or Ben's first (and only) attempt to cuddle a bee!

Other times they are more pleasantly surprised, constantly discovering new things, from finding a camel behind the flap in picture book to catching a ball for the first time after almost giving up or discovering that they can actually swim 25 metres without stopping.

This capacity to be surprised, this capacity for wonder is one of the things that Jesus treasures about little children, and it is one of the reasons why he says the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Somehow as you get older, wiser (or is that just 'harder?'), more experienced, wonder seems to rub off, and we find it harder to be surprised. We know by the time we are adults how things work, how they are supposed to work, how they are going to work.

That's why today's readings are so precious, for they show us God working through surprises. Samuel can't believe that God would be talking to him, so he thinks, not once, not twice, but three times, that Eli the old prophet is the source of the call. In the gospel the message for any adults who happen to be at rather a loss for wonder is even clearer. Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He knows like every other Jew of his time that Nazareth is a god-forsaken, end-of-the-world, run-down backwater of a place. What chance that God might be doing something good, let alone something amazing there? None. But isn't he in for a surprise! He is getting in early, training for the biggest surprise of them all, the resurrection.

In today's readings only the psalmist seems to have retained a capacity for wonder and surprise towards God. He is older than Samuel, older than Nathanael for sure, but he seems in adulthood not to have lost that precious child-like gift. In one of the most beautiful of the psalms, he writes of the wonderful way in which he has been knit together, of the surprising way in which God is always here first, which ever way he turns or goes. He writes of the incomprehensible, inexhaustible thoughts of God which cannot be fathomed or contained or predicted and are therefore, by definition, surprising.

All of this is very interesting, no doubt. But we are not here to be interested. We are here to be changed by God, to let God work out in us what happened to us all those years ago in our baptism, when we were joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, learning to die and rise again and again ourselves. That means we have to let the word of God be a yardstick by which we might measure the life of the community, and our own individual lives.

So, I wonder, what do you think your own capacity for surprise is? Are you more like Nathanael or the psalmist? Do you like it best when God works in expected or pleasant ways but misunderstand or miss altogether God's more surprising and unsettling acts? Are you fixed in your mind like Nathanael about how and where God is allowed to operate, and where God cannot be, or are you open to wonder?

Now of course I would like to think that I am like the psalmist. Wouldn't you? But I know that I am not. When I was in England we used the Book of Common Prayer a lot, and I still miss it dreadfully, the dignity of its language, the balance of its phrasing, the restraint of its devotion, its absolute 'Englishness'. It took me a long time to recognise that God might work through other liturgies and prayer books just as well, and it took a fair few surprises to bring me around. Like Nathanael's rigid views on Nazareth, an entrenched attitude to the Book of Common Prayer was what held me back from being open to God's new and surprising ways.

What is it that holds you back? A particular understanding of what the church should be? Or perhaps the parish has a "Golden Age" in the past (like every parish I've ever been in seems to have), when the vicar was better than Jesus and everything was perfect. Everything since has been a decline and corruption of that faultless time. That could block any sense of surprise at the new things God is doing now. Or perhaps you share Samuel's view that God could never be interested in talking to you? Or the view that God is only in church, so that unchurched next-door neighbour couldn't possibly be an agent of God's love? I don't know what it is for you, or this community, or if such a block even exists, but you do.

I find that I am so good at deceiving myself that I don't even notice how I block and misunderstand God. So I am in the habit from time to time of sitting down and thinking out the last year, the last six months, the last decade. Then from a distance, I see it more clearly. I see what's blocking me and stopping me from having the wonder that the psalmist knows. I see the times when God said, "Come and see" and I didn't, and that helps me a lot to be more open, more wondering in the future. I recommend a similar occasional spiritual stock-take to you as well. Give it a go. You might be surprised.

The Revd Dr Timothy Gaden
Dean of the Theological School / College Chaplain, Trinity College
tgaden@trinity.unimelb.edu.au