

The Church's prayer for Saturday 25th December

Lord Jesus Christ,
your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Saturday 25th December

A reading from Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”
Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the LORD returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.
Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

A Gospel reading from John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of

God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

A reflection from Revd David Newton, Acting Team Rector and Team Vicar for Comberton, Caldecote and Toft

All swans are white, right. That's what people in the West thought until they landed on the shores of Australia in the 17th Century. Until that moment all evidence pointed to the fact that all swans were white. As the people of England strolled along the Thames or the Ouse every swan they had ever seen was white.

So, imagine their surprise when the first Europeans came upon the shores of Australia and discovered black swans. The aboriginals thought nothing of it, but these folk from Europe couldn't believe their eyes. No amount of repeated observation back in Europe could ever have prepared them for that discovery. Here was something entirely new, entirely unpredictable.

Surprise.

Just over a decade ago Nassim Taleb wrote a book simply entitled *The Black Swan* that became a bit of a bestseller. Launching from the story of the black swan, he suggests that the currents of history are governed by the unpredictable, the unknowable, the extreme and surprising events. Looking back, we might be able to see connections, explanations and reasons for x leading to y and then z. But these explanations are primarily formed after the fact. Most of the time, the ark of history takes surprising, unpredictable, and unknowable turns because of what he terms, 'black swan' events.

The fall of the USSR, the discovery of penicillin, the rise of Christianity. All of these were black swans.

The financial crash? The pandemic? These were perhaps more predictable in some ways. But the timing of them was not. Nor their impact, nor governments reactions and the paths taken.

Even if a pandemic was predicted by some, no one expected their own last 2 years to look like they have done. Lives have been turned upside down, for ill and for good. Lives have been re-directed and re-shaped in all sorts of way. The unpredictable, unknowable, and surprising have created the context for – and possibly also the content of – our lives.

The ultimate black swan event, in these terms, is – for us as Christians – the birth of Christ.

Whilst we read the Hebrew Scriptures and see his birth foretold, this is really an explanation after the fact. In light of Christ we go, of course, 'Long ago, prophets knew'! But you can't really say that what unfolded was expected. Here was something entirely new, unpredictable, surprising, a black swan.



The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The 'Reason' behind the universe, that which made something out of nothing, the Love behind it all, this 'Word' ... came down beside us. The creator took the form of a creature.

One night, as shepherds above the hills of Bethlehem were watching the sheep, something unexpected and utterly unpredictable happened. Angels appeared in the sky declaring 'glory to God in the highest and peace to his people of earth'. A star guided them to a shed, to a manger and a baby. Nothing made them ready for that night. Nothing could have led those Shepherd to expect such a dazzling display in the sky. Nothing could have led them to know that that night would turn history upside down.

Sheer Surprise.

As a culture I'm not sure we like surprises very much. We like everything to be ordered, controllable and predictable. As those with a pretence to be gods we like to be able to control everything around us, make it work to our timing and in our way. We exercise increasing control over our environment, we're able to turn lights on and play music with a simple voice command, we're able to turn the heating on miles from home. We're able (changing the tone a bit) to control an unmanned drone over Pakistan from the safety of the Arizonan desert. We're playing at being gods in a world we think we control.

Of course, we don't.

Life is still unpredictable and uncertain. Sometimes it is unpredictable in ways that are deeply tragic: we lose a friend or family member unexpectedly; we lose a job; we get a bad hospital diagnosis. And sometimes life throws us surprises that are deeply joyful: we receive a little gift, we're blessed with a new friendship, we discover a new hobby.

Whilst the uncertainty of life certainly cuts both ways, a life without surprise would not be a good thing at all. We need uncertainty.

First, it reminds us that we are not gods. We are creatures who do not control the world, but are part of it, interdependent within it and so subject to all sorts of things happening *to us*. Surprises remind us that we are creatures. The shepherds were humbled and in awe on that hillside... but any surprise brings us down to size.

Second, uncertainty takes us out of the little cocoons that we build for ourselves. Surprises forces us to re-think, re-evaluate. Surprises get us out of our set routines and help us see the world anew.

And thirdly, and most importantly, uncertainty – and the surprises that come because of it – lift our eyes heavenward. God is the God of surprises.

Yes, God sustains the laws that govern the universe. God makes the sun rise and stars shine. God sustains the stability that we rely on. God is the God of the ordinary, mundane, and routine.

And yet, God is also the one who surprised creation by becoming a creature. God is the one who brings life out of death. God is the one who brought Israel out of slavery. God is the one who re-makes us and transforms us, who can redeem even the darkest and most corrupt of souls.

God is full of surprises.

Which is another way of saying that there is always hope. Just because things have always been a certain way doesn't mean they always have to be. Cycles of oppression can be broken. Rhythms of destruction can be overturned.

Into a world of systematic oppression and injustice God made a surprise appearance and turned the world upside down.

At its heart Christmas is about the greatest surprise of all – the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us – and that surprise changes everything. Amen.