

LP

Readers' Service

by

Rev Peter Bolt

Number: 3

Local Preachers' Office
Methodist Church House
25 Marylebone Road
LONDON
NW1 5JR

ORDER OF SERVICE

Call to Worship:

Let us enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and come into his courts with praise.
Let us give thanks to him and bless his holy name.

We shall sing Hymn number 13:

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven.

Following our hymn of praise, a time for quiet prayer: Let us pray.

Prayer

Almighty God our heavenly Father, we come together to worship you. We cannot pretend to be better than we are, for you know all about us; You understand the deep desires and longings of our hearts:

Forgive us our selfishness and pride, our self-centredness and jealousy;
Forgive us that we are so insensitive to the feelings and needs of others;
Renew us by the power of your Holy Spirit and cleanse us from our sin; In the quiet, come afresh to meet with us and accept the worship we bring.

(a moment of silence)

Now we offer to you the hours of this day,
that we may be open to your guidance in all we do.

Direct us in the way that you would have us go, that we may truly be your people, sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ as we seek to let your way of loving flow through us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Lords Prayer

Please turn to **Psalm 34**, which is number **847** in the hymn-book. May I invite you to read the parts in the darker print.

Our second hymn is an opportunity to give thanks for the fellowship we share as a part of God's people. It is Hymn 753:

All praise to our redeeming Lord.

The church is called to exercise a ministry both for, and within the community Our notices remind us of the way in which we can share in this during the coming week.

Notices and the Offertory

Let us dedicate ourselves and our gifts to God:

Father, we offer to you our gifts - our money, our love, our service. We pray

your rich blessing on the activities of our Church this coming week, that through our sharing together, we may all receive a blessing. So we offer to you all that we are in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Peace: The response is, 'And also with you.'

Let us minister to each other as we share God's peace. The peace of the Lord be always with you. (response) **And also with you** Share that peace for a moment with those closest to you. (*Allow time for people to share the peace*)

The Intercessions:

Now let us offer our ministry of prayer for the world as we mingle our prayers with those of countless others who will be worshipping in other lands.

First, let us pray for the peace of the world, remembering especially the people of (..... and their leaders. and) all lands where there is oppression, racial hatred, violence and injustice. Lord, you sent your Son to be the Prince of peace. Bless we pray, all those who seek to build better understanding and tolerance; who seek to heal divisions and work to build bridges of reconciliation in your world.

(Silence)

Now, let us pray for the Church in the world, that all who seek to follow Jesus Christ may be filled with the spirit of love, joy and peace. Let us pray especially for ministers and clergy, for lay preachers and leaders, for those who teach, or make music, for those who are the pastors of the flock.

Father, we pray for the Church in every land. Make her faithful to you in the proclamation of the gospel by word and deed. Inspire your people and give them vision, that they may strive to build your kingdom on earth.

(Silence)

Let us pray for those who are in any kind of trouble: for the sick (*especially for ...*) for the homeless and hungry; for those who mourn the loss of loved ones (*especially for ...*) and for all who are fighting depression and despair.

Father, we bring to you all those who suffer in any way. May they know that you are with them and learn to lean on your unfailing love. Give them a deeper trust and an assurance that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Silence)

Finally, let us bring to God our own needs.

Let us pray for our families and our friends.

(Silence)

Father, hear these our prayers which we bring in the precious name of Jesus Christ of Lord. Amen.

Our next hymn, by John Newton, reminds us of the many names given to Jesus. It is

Hymn number 257:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.

The Ministry of the Word:

Acts 3: verses 1 - 10. Peter and John bring healing to a man begging at the gates of the temple.

Our Gospel reading is from

Luke 19: verses 1 - 10 and relates the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus.

SERMON (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

Our closing Hymn is number 774

Lord, thy church on earth is seeking.

The Blessing

Go forth in the Saviour's peace; and let his love and joy fill your hearts. And the blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

The Message: SURPRISE! SURPRISE!

A short prayer before the message.

Father God, let the words we have heard inspire us as we seek to find a message for today. Let your Holy Spirit lead us in the truth. Amen.

Have you noticed that one of the most interesting things about life is the way that, just when we are least expecting it, something comes along to surprise us? Some surprises are pleasant - like waking up on a Monday morning to discover a letter through your letter box telling you that a distant relative in New Zealand has died and left you twenty thousand pounds! Some are not so pleasant, like looking in your rear-view mirror and discovering that you have a police car right behind you with its lights flashing and you are doing forty in a thirty miles an hour area!

I like the story of the grandfather who was taking his nine year old grand-daughter up to the top of a high-rise building. They got in the lift and he pressed the button for the top floor. However, it stopped at the second floor. The doors opened and a very attractive young woman stepped inside. She turned around to press the button for the fourth floor and the lift began to ascend. It stopped and as she got out, she turned to the old gentleman and slapped his face. He was astonished and could not think why she had done it. Then his grand-daughter said, "Granddad, I don't think that lady liked you very much." "No, I don't think she did." he replied. "I didn't like her very much either," she confided. "When she got into the lift, she stood on my foot, so when she turned around to press the button, I pinched her!"

I have the feeling that Peter and John must have felt a bit like that, when, after healing the cripple at the Beautiful gate of the temple, they found themselves a few hours later in prison, and facing the same Jewish council that had condemned Jesus not many weeks before.

If you examine both our readings today, you will find that people were astonished - surprised by the events they witnessed. In fact, it is common response to the ministry of Jesus, and of the early Church. Maybe that has something to say to us, because we are seldom surprised by what happens when we as followers of Jesus meet together. Only very rarely does someone get changed, like Zacchaeus; or healed like the cripple. Perhaps part of the weakness of the modern Church is that we have ceased to be expectant - we don't expect to be surprised any more!

Let's look at the people who were surprised in the story of Zacchaeus.

First and foremost, there was Zacchaeus himself. We all know the story of how he climbed into a sycamore tree, because he was a very little man - 'and a very little man was he' as the children's chorus says. We are also told that he was a very rich tax-collector and that means that he was a very unpopular man too. Everyone would have known him as a mean, grasping cheat who lined his pockets at the expense of everyone else - and did so in collaboration with the hated Romans!

There he was playing the part of a spectator - on his own, perched in the tree as Jesus and his friends came down the road. Now - what do you think would have been his first reaction when Jesus stopped and looked straight up at him? I want to suggest to you that it

would have been panic. He must have thought, "Oh no! He's going to show me up in front of all these people. He's a prophet, a man of God and he must despise the kind of man I am. He's bound to make a public example of me! I wish I'd stayed at home!"

How could he have anticipated our Lord's words to him? "Zacchaeus, be quick and come down; I must come and stay with you today." He must have felt, "What, me! But why didn't he choose to stay with the president of the synagogue, or one of the orthodox, upright elders of the town? Why not one of the warm-hearted, genuine followers he counts as his friends? Why me?"

So it was a very surprised and delighted man who came down the tree that day. One who knew in his heart that he was not really good enough for the honour he had received.

It's like that with Jesus. He chooses all kinds of people to follow him. I heard recently that two of our ministers in Northern Ireland were once terrorists imprisoned for violence. It was in prison that God called them to a change of life. Now they offer the gospel, rather than the bomb, as the answer to the situation.

Maybe, for too long you have been a spectator - watching Jesus at work from the remoteness of your own hiding place in a tree. And he is calling you now to come down and accept him into your life in a new way. Surprises are not always for others.

Secondly, let us look at those who were surprised by Jesus's actions - because he left them angry and dis-approving! Luke tells us that 'there was a general murmur of dis-approval.' 'He has gone,' they said 'to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'

It was the same for Peter and John in our first reading today. The chief priests, the controller of the Temple, and the Sadducees were 'exasperated at their teaching' and had them arrested. Thus began the first confrontation between the followers of Jesus and the authorities - the first of many. Just as Jesus' actions did not meet with the approval of the people of Jericho, so the actions of the early Christians did not meet with the approval of the religious or secular authorities.

Unfortunately, it is an oft-repeated story within the Church. There used to be a Methodist Church in Broad Street, Nottingham. Back in the last century, William Booth brought a crowd of his rough friends to the worship and was horrified to discover that they were not welcome. He left the Church and began the Salvation Army. How would we react today to a crowd of skinheads? Is there a welcome for people of all races in our Church? Can we honestly claim to be free from prejudice?

How do we respond to those who want to worship in a different way? Would there be a general murmur of disapproval if someone raised their hands in praise during one of the hymns? Or if they said, 'Amen' loudly during the sermon?

Be careful about those murmurs of disapproval that run through Churches from time to time. Our Lord sometimes surprises us in ways we find hard to deal with.

Finally, the last group who were surprised by what happened to Zacchaeus, had to wait a little while. It was later in that day that Zacchaeus told Jesus that he had decided to give half of his possessions to charity, and that if he had cheated anyone, he would repay him four-fold. The Stripes theatre company have a delightful sketch which starts with an old lady bolting and double locking her door for the night. When she hears a knock on the door, she says, "Go away, I don't open my door after it gets dark." As the knocking continues, she eventually asks who is there and finds that it is Zacchaeus. That only makes her more angry. She is convinced that he has come to demand more money from her and is just unwilling to believe that he has come to give her money! She just cannot cope with the idea. In the end she grudgingly insists he puts it through the letter box.

I wonder just how many people were surprised by Zacchaeus' new life style? He was certainly acting 'out of character' as we sometimes say. They would have said he him, "You've changed!"

That's what Jesus said to him. "today salvation has come to this house, for this man too is a son of Abraham, and the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what is lost."

Rev Dr Alan Walker, who for many years was director of evangelism for the World Methodist Council, tells how once he went to conduct a mission in Fiji. After a crowded service in the main Church, he was asked to go to a small village, where the few faithful Church members were having a bad time, because of drunkenness, the immorality and bad spirit everywhere. Also the people were lazy and had let things go. He went by boat, and walked up from the landing place to the Church, where he preached a sermon on the difference Christ can make.

Some years later, he returned to Fiji and was asked to re-visit the village. This time he was met at the landing place by a large, white robed choir who led him to the Church through a village that had been transformed. The people asked him to unveil a plaque to celebrate the date he had come on his first visit, because that was when a few people had been converted and their witness had transformed the whole life of the village. Again and again in history, Jesus Christ has challenged men and women to respond to his call, and as a result whole communities have been transformed. Who can estimate the difference the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta has had on people, not only in India, but all over the world!

If we return to our other story of Peter and John, we must be aware of the tremendous change that came over them, and the other disciples, after Pentecost. But they didn't keep it to themselves. Their new life-style was so dynamic that others were drawn to believe in the life changing power of Jesus.

Charles Wesley wrote:

O that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.

Maybe today, we too can experience the surprises of our Lord as we open our lives to him, and let his transforming power renew us.

Are we still perhaps, 'spectator Christians' like Zacchaeus, watching from a distance, but not getting involved? Is it time for us to come down and receive Jesus into our hearts and homes? And to make real changes to our life-style?

Are we sometimes members of the 'general murmur of discontent' brigade? Quick to criticise anything that disturbs the status quo! Unwilling to accept others who don't conform to our way of doing things?

All of us know where we should be! We should be living so much under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit that our lives bring God's surprises to the people around us.

Response:

Let us be quiet for a few moments as we ask our Lord to draw us closer to himself and to show us how we can be his instruments for reconciliation, for forgiveness, for caring and for witness in our communities.