

Psalm 85
Matthew 14:22-33

Sur-prise

In a sentence:

Though it might feel like we are falling, Jesus is a very good catch

Sur-prise

Last Monday morning, I went down to the Curzon Street church to take some photographs of the inside of the empty buildings before the sale was finalised the next day.

It was a poignant moment, although it was no *surprise* that the moment would come. Standing in the empty, dusty Union Memorial Church led me to reflect that those who built the place *would* have been surprised at what it had come to. Reflecting further, the more I pondered the word “surprise”, the stranger it became.

For us today, “surprise” describes something which breaks in as a momentary disordering of our world, whether for good or bad. But the word comes to us from Latin through French, and has a root meaning of “over-taken”. A sur-prise is a grasping or a seizing. To be surprised is to be *captured*. Perhaps it’s not surprising(!), then, to learn that the words predator, prey and reprieve are related to surprise.

Now, the problem with getting into the background of words is that we – or the preacher, at least – might be tempted to make modern words mean now what they clearly don’t. And yet, this is precisely what preaching is supposed to do. Our language, like our bread, grows stale with time. Familiarity here breeds not so much contempt as simple indifference or even ignorance – that we don’t know what we are saying. We know, of course, that our times are constantly changing. But as the times change, our language no longer works as it once did. This is particularly the case with social, political and theological language – language which gives contour to the heart of our being. We could, perhaps, invent new language, and this happens as well. But we also need to *strange* our language to make it not only new but *vital* – life-giving.

Consider hearing “surprised” as “captured”. It now becomes the case that we are *always* surprised because we are *always* captive to something. We are captive to our bodies – which kind we got and what our lifestyle and age have done to it. We are captive to fear of whatever kind presently presses in on us. We are made captives when we fall in love, to the economy we live, and to our mortality. In various ways and to various things, we are captive, we are seized, we are “sur-prise”. This is *inescapable*, whether in our personal lives or in our lives together as a society or a church.

As a community, we were surprised by the problems with Union Memorial Church. We were surprised, in the ordinary sense, by the unexpected movement of the foundations. But, more profoundly, we were seized by the need to do something about it. For about 15 years, we were over-taken – “sur-prise” – by the problem. We could more dramatically extend this characterisation of that experience by bringing in the related predator-prey language. Were we not prey to our desires to remain in that place, and to our sense of responsibility for it, but also to the dilapidated condition of faith in contemporary society, and to the financial decisions of the wider church, and to the foibles we each brought to the process? This is not *necessarily* to criticise anything

which happened, but only to make strange our way of talking about it. Were we not grasped – predated as prey – by things much bigger than any of us? Was this not a “sur-prising”, a seizing, a capture?

I think that this way of talking about what we’ve been through. But it also tells us something about our present experience here, now that we have moved. For though we are now here at the CTM, it has *not* yet sur-prised us, it has not yet grasped us, it does not yet hold us.

Falling

And this brings me to the problem of the moment: not yet to be held is to be falling, one of the most disorienting experiences we can have. In its own frightening way, a fall surprises us – it takes us over. We know it is happening but we can’t do anything about it. We have to ride a fall – we have to ride *nothingness* – to the ground, until the ground captures us again, and not usually very gently.

At last, then let us look to our reading from Matthew this morning. Out on the water, the disciples are seized, surprised, overtaken by the wind and the waves, and there appears in the midst an impossible thing which seizes them more tightly in their fears. It beckons to them but they don’t believe, and so Peter proposes a test: “*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*” Jesus replies, “Come.” So Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus. But he notices the strong wind, becomes frightened, begins to sink, and cries out, “Lord, save me!”

We here have stepped out of a boat on the high seas, imagining that it is better to respond to Jesus’ command than to let the ship suck us down. Perhaps some of us have also done this in some way in our own lives. But, having disembarked, there is a lot of water to cross before we get to him, before we are held again. And in that space, it is as if we are abandoned: Lord, is *that* you? Is *this* you? Or have you forsaken us? (We might note here, in passing, that Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross is just such a “crossing of the water”).

“*Lord, save me!*” Peter cries, and Jesus reaches out and seizes him and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” But doubt *what*? Doubt that water can hold us up? No. Christian faith doesn’t believe that, with enough faith, we could walk on water. We believe rather that, though we are falling, Jesus is a good catch.

Caught

No small part of the life of faith – in fact, of any life – is waiting to be caught in God’s secure hands as we take a step away from what can no longer sustain us into some new sur-prising. Faith is living in the expectation that we will be caught, that we will be surprised by the embrace of God. Of course, we work hard most of the time to ensure we don’t fall; this is what strategies, planning and training are all about.

But falling is inevitable, and once it happens, we can only *let* it happen. If we are falling then, the only question is whether we think we will be caught, or come crashing to the ground.

In terms of the gospel story, we ride the fall waiting for the hand of Jesus to grasp us by the wrist and drag us waist-deep through the fearful nothingness to himself, to God.

If this is what we believe, our present and unavoidable finding-again of ourselves in a new place is not the end of the story but a necessary thing if we are to discover God again and anew.

We once had to “lean into” the decision to move here; with Peter, we started walking on the water.

Now that we *are* here on the water let us again lean into what this surprising God will do to make this time and place ours, and to remake us for this place and time.
