

***Living As a Surprise***

(From *The Epistle*. 1 St. Peter ii. 11. ff.)

**1 Pe. 2:11** *Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; 12 Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. 13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; 14 Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. 15 For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: 16 As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. 17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.*

The element of surprise is invariably used in the process of getting attention. Anything that disturbs the *status quo* in some manner, great or small, is bound to turn heads. It doesn't take much. Extravagant dress. A bullhorn on a street corner. Rushing headlong into a quiet assembly. America thrives on being startled. It's the stuff of good advertising. And if people don't get enough of it in the normal course of life, they pay good money to go and see it in the latest movie.

Our Lord used surprise with astonishing liberality and effectiveness. Every aspect of His life amounted to some form of it, from His birth in a lowly manger, to His appearance as a 12-year-old in the Jerusalem temple where he dialogued with scholars many times his age, to His striding as a Man into the streets of first century Israel, performing miracles, healing the sick, and teaching with power. Those who loved and accepted Him could only brace themselves and wait for the next element of the unexpected which invariably characterized His presence. Those who hated Him with ever increasing intensity feared His unpredictable spontaneity, and resented His refusal to take the beaten paths upon which they exercised such control. For His followers He was a divine enigma, but for His enemies He was a stumbling stone and a mortal threat to their very survival.

It is Eastertide, and we have just witnessed the greatest surprise of all: our Lord's resurrection from the dead, following His death upon Calvary's hill at the hands of the Roman overlords and Jewish leaders. His followers were overjoyed, when they finally came to terms with what had happened. His foes were unaffected, refusing to accept its reality. But it remains the greatest surprise of all time, from which the world will never recover.

Today's Epistle carries this matter of surprise onward into our lives as believers. This passage from 1 Peter 2 precedes the one we examined last week from the same chapter, and so our discussion today will be closely related. Remember last week's Collect?: we are to "daily endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life", the One who was "given unto us... as an ensample of godly life". As Christ lived as a holy surprise in His day, so are we to do the same.

How is this to be done? Through artful, clever technique? Through becoming as good or better than the world in utilizing the endless variety of means it possesses to proclaim its beliefs, its ideals, its own gospel? This is a great temptation. After all, such things seem to work, if results in terms of money and numbers are indicators. But look at the Epistle. We are to create a very real stir, but by utterly different modes:

-... *abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul...*

-*[Have] your conversation honest...*

-*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake...*

-*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.*

Now one might well ask, how can such behavior carry with it the element of surprise? There is nothing attention-commanding, nor startling, nor extravagant about such a way of living. In fact, this manner of life might be seen as so unobtrusive as to utterly escape the notice of 21st-century people who have a whole host of other things competing for their attention. These virtues appear pitifully outmoded and even contemptible in an age that exalts power, authority, and accomplishment.

But this remains our very most effective way of springing upon the world the greatest surprise we can offer it. It is the imitation of the character of Christ, and when we do so consistently, conscientiously, prayerfully, we will be offering the world something obtainable by no other means, whatsoever.

Take a moment to contrast these qualities with those with which people are all too familiar. *Fleshly lusts* include greed, covetousness, the love of money, selfish ambition, pride of property and possession, as well as unrestrained passions of all sorts. If I exhibit these qualities habitually, I fit in conveniently and comfortably with the crowd. But if I instead strive for their absence from my life, the vacuum -as it were- that results is a very significant absence. It is... a *surprise*. "What is 'wrong' with such a person?", is the implicit question. Is his conduct merely a matter of personality, temperament, or taste, or is there a far deeper source for his choices, rooted in matters of principle and faith?

*Submit yourselves to every ordinance...* For many, this is seen as a sign of weakness. A great joke is made generally today of government and obligations associated with it. We find ourselves joining in the patter of disrespect and skepticism that characterize even casual discussions of this topic. But in so doing, especially as Christians, we risk the possibility of misleading the unconverted by our example. There is an order to life of which God is the ultimate Author. It is a reflection of His own being, the One who has carefully ordered everything for the good of His Creation. Although we may rightfully take issue with policies and people, we cannot undercut that which He has ordained. Here is another *surprise* to a world which is becoming indifferent to principles of government for the preservation of which tens of thousands have given their

lives. There is a powerful message proclaimed to the unbeliever when the Christian quietly and submissively accepts the inevitability of government, even one with which he has significant dissatisfaction, knowing that Scripture has thus enjoined him, and that the good of government ultimately outweighs the bad.

*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.* Our culture is fraught with casualness. Observe how people interrelate. Propriety, mannerliness, due respect, all are being repudiated, along with so many other remnants of the past that are now rejected as needless impositions. This rush to force everyone to occupy one level of dull uniformity, where all distinctions are eliminated under the banner of fairness, is stripping men of dignity. We dare not acknowledge anyone, lest in so doing another is somehow left unacknowledged. In the midst of this sham democratization is another opportunity for the believer to create *surprise*. *Honour all men.* Recognizing, according to Scripture, that every individual bears the stamp of God's image, the believer exercises himself constantly to approach men with respect, honor, and politeness, doing his best to restore the dignity of which men are being inadvertently robbed.

His love for the Church, *the brotherhood*, must be ardent, because this will demonstrate how highly he values the Church, another *surprise* in this unchurched, de-churched hour.

*The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes* (Ps. 36:1). What is more lacking today than *the fear of God*? It is next to meaningless in modern parlance. But the Christian lives by it. All of his actions, each decision he makes, are weighed by whom He knows God to be, and by the uncontested place of Sacred Scripture in his life. We should be marked by our fear of God.

Just as Jesus' life was an offense to many, so will be a modern life lived in this fashion, as well. But our aim, through our steadfast dedication to this calling, is the reaching of those around us [*who*], *by our good works, which they shall behold, [will] glorify God in the day of visitation.* We shouldn't doubt for a moment the surprise element associated with a godly life. Everyone expects compromise, sin, half-heartedness, insincerity, indifference to God's law, mockery of virtue, and apostasy. After all, the universal presence of these things serves to underscore their own choices in those areas, and to keep the standards maintained at the very lowest, most comfortable minimum.

But how surprised people are when they meet believers who live their faith like they mean it.

It could mean the salvation of their souls.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*