

**September 10th January 2016**

**Isaiah 43:1-7 , Luke 3 15-17 and 21-22**

*One of my favourite messages of those I received over the Christmas period came through Facebook from the Parish of Leigh Woods and Abbott's Leigh where I was on placement last summer. It read;*

*"Wishing all our Facebook friends a wonderfully happy Christmas with blessings both hoped for and serendipitous- if there is such a word"*

*Well I have looked it up and yes there is a word, it means, occurring or discovered by chance in a happy or beneficial way. I can also report at least one serendipitous blessing I have experienced in this building last Saturday when I happened across a large piece of blank paper underneath the Christmas tree of exactly the size shape and colour I needed for the Young Seekers activity the following morning. I conferred with others here at the time and all agreed that there was no obvious use for it and it is now part of our Epiphany display in the hall. So thank you to the person who left it there. If it was there for a reason and has been missed do let me know and please accept my apologies.*

*Serendipitous - occurring or discovered by chance in a happy or beneficial way. Of course just because something is unexpected, does not mean it was unplanned. The people by the river Jordan were filled with expectation, they were present for a significant episode in God's plan to save his people. But not one of them could have expected events to unfold in the way that they did. These people thought they had come to see a great man, he could even be the Messiah, who would deliver them from Roman oppression and make them into a mighty nation as they had been under King David.*

*John explained that he was not the Messiah, but a messenger, who would prepare the people for the Messiah. John's appearance and lifestyle may have been unexpected. So might his tough talking. Then John asks them to do something unexpected. John tells the people to prepare for the Lord, they must repent and be baptised. It is likely that most Jews would have been familiar with the idea of baptism. Later it is known as a rite of admission for Gentiles who wished to embrace the Jewish faith. My reading around this subject suggests that it may well have carried those overtones at the time of John. (Drane).*

*John is effectively asking people who already regarded themselves as full members of the people of God to undergo a rite that they would have regarded as appropriate only for those who were previously unbelievers.*

*I wonder how the people felt about the way things were working out. Were they stimulated by the idea that something unusual was happening, intrigued and challenged by John's approach, or did they close their minds, suspicious of something they didn't understand? Perhaps they felt, as I often do, that they just didn't have the time or energy to grapple with something that wasn't part of their plan.*

*How do you respond when things happen unexpectedly?*

*For John too this particular day had some unexpected surprises. Jesus himself comes to John to be baptised. We know from the account in Matthew's gospel that John recognised his cousin, and, despite John's protestations, Jesus insists on being baptised.*

*To get new ideas about a particular story, I quite like to look at pictures by scrolling through Google images on the computer and seeing the different ways a passage has been interpreted. It is really noticeable how vulnerable Jesus looks as he is about to be submerged in the river Jordan, especially in contrast to pictures of the later part of the reading where Jesus is bathed in the light of God's glory.*

*By being baptised, Jesus comes alongside every member of the human race who starts their journey with God. Jesus did not need to repent, but he does so to show that he is fully human. Unexpectedly, the vulnerable baby in a manger, becomes a vulnerable man, lowered into the river Jordan. A man who would live the life planned by God, die the death and rise again entering into the lives of each of us so that the prophecies we have heard from Isaiah can be fulfilled.*

*"Do not fear,"*

*"I have redeemed you,"*

*"I will be with you"*

*Then most unexpected of all, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. A voice came from heaven.*

*"You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."*

*What a moment for those people who happened to choose that day to search out John and find out what he was saying.*

*Of course sometimes things happen unexpectedly which are not happy and appear to be of benefit to no one. We can experience times of tragedy and loss which seem unjust and unfair.*

*This is not really what I want to focus on today, save to say that God's big picture of our world spinning through time and space is quite different to our own. There are many things we don't understand. The disciples neither expected nor understood Jesus trial and crucifixion nor his death and resurrection. Sometimes, when we experience hard times, or hear of the suffering of others all we can do is remember that Jesus is alongside and hold fast to Isaiah's words,*

*"Do not fear," "I have redeemed you," "I will be with you"*

*A few years ago we did a study in our house group about Spiritual Transformation called Fully Devoted. As an exercise we were asked, for one week, to focus on Jesus's presence with us throughout the seemingly inconsequential moments of each day.*

*It is an exercise which has stuck in the minds of several members of the group. Different people felt Jesus's presence in different ways. All felt challenged by the exercise, which has been the subject of conversation since during our group discussions.*

*Maybe you could try it at some point during the coming week. It is always useful to be reminded that Jesus is alongside us in all parts of life including the unexpected and unplanned.*

*We may have many plans for the forthcoming year. Plans for work or education, plans for our family life, our social life and perhaps our spiritual life. Plans are good, but can I suggest that you hold onto them lightly, to allow Jesus to come alongside you and the Holy Spirit to guide you bringing blessings both hoped for and serendipitous.*

*Kathy Kilgour 10 January 2016*