

I love surprises – most of the time! Seeing someone unexpectedly downtown who you enjoy being with. A positive text or email about something you've been involved with. A happy story on BBC Breakfast before you go out to work.

Some surprises aren't great. Hearing that someone you love has a nasty illness or that a friend from school has passed away. Perhaps a neighbour has been scammed out of a lot of money.

All of us encounter surprises from time to time, because we don't know what the future holds.

For most people who encountered Jesus in Judea two thousand years ago, they would have found Him a most surprising man. The Bible even says this. He healed people, He forgave their sins, He performed awesome miracles. He said things that on the face of it seem quite tricky and yet for example He challenges us to love our enemies and to be a beacon of light in a dark world.

Jesus' 12 Disciples had spent around three years with Him. They saw at first-hand what an amazing man He was. They saw many thousands of lives changed through Jesus' love and *their* lives were changed too.

Near the end of Jesus' earthly existence, the 12 would have experienced several major surprises and yet none of them were a surprise to Jesus.

Jesus is so different to us and yet so similar in one important respect. Jesus was fully human and yet He was also fully God. He is the only person to have chosen to come to earth. Our First Reading described some of this. He decided to have Mary as His biological mother and Joseph as His surrogate dad. He had come to earth on a Mission. He had come to die so that the terrible effect of sin on mankind could be dealt with fully, perfectly and forever. Mankind could do nothing to sort out the problem of sin, though they tried and continue to try, as the effects of sin and evil still cause problems today.

There are over 300 prophecies about Jesus' life and death in the Old Testament. Jesus' life and death weren't an accident. A great deal of detail is described hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Several books of the Bible help us plot out various aspects of Jesus' life on earth.

Even though Jesus' followers and family would have known the Old Testament very well, they didn't understand that Jesus was fulfilling much of what they had read about.

Imagine being one of Jesus' followers and you're in an Upper Room with Him. Jesus has just shared a Passover Meal with you, but He said things that you didn't understand. Perhaps you'll ask Him about it in a few days time or get someone like Peter to ask Him next week.

However, there is no chance to ask Jesus what He means, as one of your friends, Judas Iscariot, betrays Him to the Romans. He is taken before an official Court and sentenced to be crucified. You knew that this was a terrible death. You had never seen one, as it is vile, but people you know have and they have commented on how awful, terrible and barbaric it is. The victim can't breathe and the pain from the nails in their arms and legs is terrific. What about the crown of thorns on His head. That was the Romans trying to humiliate Jesus. They were mocking Him!

Surely Jesus the Messiah can do a miracle and get out of this? Surely, He can call on God and some angels will be sent to sort out this major miscarriage of justice. No. The miracle is that Jesus fully intends and is fully willing to go to the cross. It is a punishment, but not as Pilate and the Romans think. It's the punishment for all the sins of the world. Jesus knew He had to die. It was no surprise to Him. He wanted our relationship with God to be made whole again. Only Jesus could sacrifice Himself to let this happen.

So Jesus was tortured and He was on the cross for hours. Eventually, He knew the time was right and He died. Jesus died. He didn't pass out. Jesus died.

He was taken off the cross and buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and maybe some other disciples. What did Jesus' followers think? What about His family? Jesus, their Messiah and hero was dead. It was on the Sunday after this that another surprise happened. Jess' dead body was missing. The Disciples didn't know where it was. The Romans had no idea either. The Jewish leaders would have liked to have known where it was, but they had no clue.

Suddenly the secret was out. Jesus who had died, was now alive. He had risen from the dead. His 11 Disciples saw Him, as did hundreds of other followers. These encounters occurred in various places and at various times.

Jesus was alive! What a surprise. What a bountiful gift for us His followers over two thousand years later. Jesus had taken the punishment for our sins and it was a terrible punishment. Now He had risen from the dead and was physically with His followers on earth again for a few weeks.

Something else that was surprising was to happen. After Jesus had ascended into heaven, the third Person of the Trinity came and indwelt the followers of God. Today we can still ask God to live inside us.

Easter isn't about eggs, bunnies nor Simnel cake. Easter is when we celebrate Jesus surprising us. He died for us so that we could have new life and have assurance of going to heaven. He rose from the dead and is now seated in heaven.

He still surprises us if we let Him. Ask God to surprise you over the next few days. Ask Him to lead you and guide you. May His sacrifice and compassion continue to change us. He loves us like no one else. Let God and His divine love and amazing grace surprise you today. Open your hearts and lives to Him today.

Thine be the glory.