

28th November 2020

Unexpectedness

“I distinguish the picturesque and the beautiful, and I add to them, in the laying out of grounds, a third and distinct character, which I call *unexpectedness*.”

Thomas Love Peacock, Headlong Hall

I have a friend who, when something goes wrong, will pronounce, “Oh, such foolish virgins!” The reference comes, of course, from Jesus’ parable of the ten virgins who were to be ready for a wedding celebration. It was the custom of the day for a bridegroom to come at night to the bride’s house where the bridesmaids attended her. When the groom’s approach was announced, these maidens – unmarried women of the village – went out with lamps to light his way into the house for the marriage celebration.

In Jesus’ story, there were ten young women – the Authorised Version of the bible calls them virgins – and, when the time came, five of them were ready with their lamps, while the other five, having no concept of “unexpectedness”, were ill-prepared. “Oh, such foolish virgins!”

It’s a story that’s strange to our ears. What wedding celebration in our culture would begin at a random day or hour, leaving us scrambling round to find a piper, a suitable cake, a band for the ceilidh, or even a minister? But the *meaning* of the parable transcends time, culture and tradition. For Jesus is warning people that we would all be the better for living with what Thomas Love Peacock called *unexpectedness*.

Now that the regulations for the Christmas period have been announced by our respective governments, we can make decisions, plan more than we could have done a few days ago, and know what’s expected. But I have a sense that, no matter what we do this Christmas, we should still live in an atmosphere of “unexpectedness”. We *will* be doing things differently. We may even be creating new traditions. And we will certainly be aware of a change in atmosphere as we process new and different feelings. But that should be good for us. For if we live with *unexpectedness* more than we’ve done before, perhaps the meaning and the message of Christmas might get through to us in new and unexpected ways.

A prayer for today

“Love came down at Christmas!” Indeed? Goodness, I never expected that! Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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