

WEEKLY SERMON

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After darkness, a day of joy and sunshine

Two weeks ago, I got up early to get to the station. I was due in London for a challenging bishops' meeting. Dark clouds shrouded my heart.

As I waited on the platform for the train, I heard someone call my name from behind. It was my friend Sophie. Dressed head-to-toe in a flame-orange dress. Sophie is Bishop of Doncaster. It was such a tonic to spend the journey with her. A ray of sunshine.

When we got off the train in Euston, a well-dressed woman rushed over to her. "You're the woman who left her credit card when you bought that dress in our shop yesterday!"

Sophie opened her purse. Sure enough, her credit card was missing. I realised I would be going near the shop that Friday, so I offered to collect it on Sophie's behalf and post it to her.

I gave the woman – her name was Andree – my business card, so she could assure her colleagues I was bona fide. "You're a bishop!" she said with surprise. "Yes, we're both bishops."

The woman was thrilled. "Let's have a selfie". And so we did. "What are the chances of meeting like this?" What a story.

But it doesn't end there. Five minutes later we bumped into each other again in the ladies' loos. The woman said: "Our work WhatsApp group has gone crazy. They couldn't believe you were bishops."

She looked me straight in the eye: "We're having a ladies' event a week on Saturday in a new restaurant. Would you come and model for us?"

My eyes teared up. Never in all my 50 years have I been asked to be a model.

"You have made my day – I would be absolutely honoured."

"What are the chances of bumping into each other again," she said. "Thank the Universe"

"We call it a God-incidence" I smiled. (I'd just written a book about these calling cards of God's Spirit, the serendipities that that my scientific rationalist training used to put down to coincidence...!)

We hugged and whooped. Exchanged names and numbers then Sophie and I literally bounced into our difficult meeting, full of joy, telling everyone we met our story.

Saturday dawned. Glorious sunshine. Sophie and I met Andree at the high-end fashion shop that morning.

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“Thank you SO much for inviting us to do this.” We breathed excitedly. “You brought us so much joy”.

“I never expected to be a model” I confessed. “I know God’s been trying to work on how I feel about my appearance.”

I found myself telling her the story of how I woke on the morning of my ordination, 30 years ago, in glorious sunshine, with a Bible verse in my head: “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice. For your voice is sweet and your face is fair” (Song of Songs 2).

“Wow! Can I record that on my phone,” she said. “I’m always looking for ways to help women feel better about themselves. Women come into our shop, carrying so much stress or sadness. We help them find an outfit that makes them feel better about themselves. And it’s like a dark cloud has lifted.”

So last Saturday, Sophie and I giggled our way through a day of different outfits. Specially chosen for us. With six other middle-aged models, we sashayed our way through a packed restaurant in three different sets of beautiful clothes – beach, day-time and the night out.

We had so much fun. A day of joy and sunshine. And I couldn’t resist buying the silver pants! Bonus ray of light.

Bishop Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster