

Dear Friends,

Sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes things go wonderfully right, even when we think they have gone wrong. When that happens, we might call it serendipity. This has been defined as, "*the faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for*" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). I guess it is like getting out the coat you haven't worn since last winter and finding a £20 note in the pocket. It may not be life changing but it brightens your day. We owe the word to Horace Walpole who coined it based on a Persian fable.

Sometimes a serendipitous event might be life changing. A young woman was crying in a train. An army chaplain, in uniform, speaks to her and they have a coffee and a chat in a station café as he listens to her. Years later the chaplain is looking for a property in a special location. Knowing he can't really afford it he enquires about one that he hears is just on the market. It turns out that the vendor is executor of an estate and is keen for a quick sale. It further turns out that years earlier she was crying on a train and was comforted by an army chaplain and remembers the intervention with much gratitude. Serendipity!

Students of medical history tell of the serendipitous discovery of penicillin by Alexander Fleming. Although a happy accident was involved, Alexander Fleming had the insight to recognise and investigate what he had discovered. In doing so he paved the way for modern medicine and the preservation of countless lives. His story begs the question; do we sometime fail to recognise and capitalise on serendipity when it occurs? Gary Player, among others, is often credited with the aphorism, '*the harder I practice, the luckier I get*'. Confucius made a similar statement linking luck with the acquisition of knowledge, the point being that often we are responsible for our own "luck".

Sarah Gilbert is Professor of vaccinology at Oxford University. The many sacrifices her family have made to support her career over the decades are well documented. Following the announcement of successful trials of the new Covid-19 vaccine, she has been quoted as saying, "*It's a huge relief, now I need sleep*". Nevertheless, one headline reads, "*Oxford vaccine dosing error led to 90pc success rate by accident*". And so, apparently, serendipity following a mistake in the doses of vaccine given to some people in the trial, increased the success rate from 62% to 90%. A vice president of AstraZeneca is quoted as saying, "*The reason we had the half dose is serendipity*". However, without the skill and effort of people like Sarah Gilbert, such serendipity would not have happened.

The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ (2nd ed.1957) by James Stewart is a cherished book in our house. The second chapter, "The Fulness of Time", is noteworthy. Stewart cites the advent of figures like Luther, Knox and Wesley as being at just the right time, when the conditions were perfect for their ministries. Jesus, he argues, is the supreme example of this kind of providence. *'It was the hour foreordained in the divine wisdom – when God sent forth His Son'*. God had prepared the world over the course of centuries for the coming of Jesus. Politically, economically, linguistically, morally, and religiously the world was ready for the gospel of salvation through Christ to spread and take root in the Roman world. *'So, the Redeemer came. Somewhere in the mind and heart of God from the very foundation of the earth the Christ had been waiting... It is still the Day of the Lord, whenever another soul enthrones Him'* (Stewart 1957:18). The transport links, common language and Roman peace that enabled the Church to set the world on fire, may seem like serendipity. When viewed through the lense of faith, we see the meticulous planning by our almighty and all wise God.

After months of lockdowns, shutdowns and maybe even meltdowns we keenly anticipate the coming of the Covid-19 vaccines with the promise of near normality. While we were frustrated at seeming inactivity, scientists laboured in their laboratories. For centuries God's people had anticipated the Messiah's advent, frustrated that God seemed to be doing nothing, whilst all the time the world was being prepared. Perhaps you have been praying for a loved one to come to faith, frustrated a seeming lack of answers for your prayers. Don't give up! A local preacher once told me how his wife had faithfully prayed for his conversion for about 20 years. In the quiet places of peoples' hearts God is preparing them to say, *"Even so, come, Lord Jesus"*.

I attended a Sunday School as a child where we sang a little prayer chorus: *'... Come to my heart Lord Jesus. Come in today come in to stay, Oh, come to my heart Lord Jesus.'* Let's make that our Advent prayer, for God has been preparing the way - even if it seems like serendipity when it happens.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.