

A sermon preached on the Second Sunday after Trinity (9 June) 2013, by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

On the streets of the Upper West Side of New York, these words were seen on a handbill: 'Missing Dog. Fifty dollar reward. Three legs. Blind in left eye. Right ear missing. Broken tail. Answers to the name, *Lucky*.'

It may seem a strange theme for a sermon, on what will be the last Sunday morning in Chapel for some of you, but today I want to talk about misadventure, misfortune, and its place in the lives of those who believe in God. I choose this topic because it's important especially for people who are successful in the world's eyes. High fliers, high achievers, are the ones who are most likely to have set out some kind of plan for their future, or to have had such a plan imposed on them by others. In consequence, they're sometimes the most likely to be taken aback, maybe devastated, when something goes wrong and the plan is fouled up. When you are programmed for success and pressured to attain it (subtly or not-so-subtly), failure can be a terrible spectre. It can take on monstrous proportions. It can so paralyse us, that we're unable to see how misfortune, how things regarded as failure, can be – not an enemy but a friend – actually a helpful companion on our journey.

Think of today's first reading: think of St Paul, Saul of Tarsus. *There* was a high flier, a high achiever, advanced – and he knew it – 'advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people' (Gal. 1:14). He'd had the best education a young Pharisee could hope for. He sat at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the greatest of Jewish teachers. Saul had so many advantages: he was a Roman citizen by birth, of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, properly brought up, well equipped to serve God 'according to the strict manner of the law.' He must have been a rising star, and 'as to righteousness under the Law [he was, he said,] blameless.' (Acts 22:3, Phil. 3:5-6) Then, what a mess. What must the other Pharisees have thought? Saul has a strange misadventure on the road to Damascus. He falls to the ground. When he gets up, he seems to have gone mad: holding forth in synagogues, promoting the wild new beliefs about that troublemaker Jesus, which he himself had been so good at stamping out. This promising young man who had everything going for him starts inciting people to defy the Law, he's reduced to the indignity of public beatings and imprisonment, he embarks on crazy voyages half way across the Mediterranean, before predictably coming to a bad end, having his head chopped off (so tradition says) in Rome.

To some, Saul must have been a failure, a huge disappointment. His life did not go according to plan – not according to any foreseeable human plan. Yet we know from his writings that he wouldn't have had it any other way. We are able to recognise his experience as one of the great success stories of the early Church; but its greatest glory is the way it shows there is a certain kind of success which can only be born out of what looks like failure. There is a certain kind of plan which can come to fruition only through what looks like disappointment or misfortune.

All of us, without exception, will meet with experiences that overthrow our plans and goals. Events that defy and seem to wreck the aims we had in mind. For those of you who are about to move on to the great wide world at the end of this week, such experiences might not yet be familiar. But you may have had a few, and they will keep coming, because they keep coming to everyone. When they do – although they may knock you sideways – try if you can to remember that there are advantages to failure and disappointment. Try if you can

to remember that some kinds of progress in life can be realised only when our assumptions and plans are overthrown.

Think for a moment of how scientific advances are sometimes possible only because an experiment has shown that some bright idea turns out to be wrong. Movement towards the next level of understanding may take place only after a question has been posed, perhaps with great hope and excitement, and the answer turns out to be no. Which means it is time to try something altogether different. After all, our capacity to foresee the future isn't as great as we like to think. Awhile ago, in the *Oxford Magazine*, someone presented a little collection of statements from highly qualified people, predictions that have become famous because they were wrong. Like Lord Kelvin – President of the Royal Society – pronouncing that 'Heavier than air machines are impossible.' That was in 1895. Or Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Professor of Strategy at the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, just before the First World War, saying that 'Aeroplanes are interesting toys but of no military value.' Or the Decca record company, when they rejected the Beatles after a 1962 audition, on the grounds that 'guitar music is on the way out.'¹ I've certainly made some predictions and declarations that turned out to be just as wrong as those. A good number of them have had to do with what I thought would come next in my life. A hope and a plan, a question posed, a path attempted – but sometimes we are simply at cross purposes with what God has in mind, or to use Thomas Merton's wonderful image, we find we have been struggling to climb a ladder which is leaning against the wrong wall. To look at disappointments and failures in this way, when they come to us, is not at all easy. It is an act of faith. But very gradually we come to learn, again and again, that what feels like failure or disaster when we are going through it, becomes a necessary part of a more meaningful, more worthwhile kind of success.

The late Peter Gomes, for many years minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard, once told a congregation how misreably crestfallen he was, as a bright ambitious student in school, when he applied to the college of his choice – and was rejected. Some forty years later, upon receiving an honorary doctorate from that same college, he said he did so with feelings not of 'sweet revenge,' as he had anticipated, but of 'divine providence.' 'There was a plan,' he said. 'It just wasn't mine.'² Might we dare to look at our own failures, and come to terms with the obstacles that arise before us, in that spirit? You may experience the collapse of a relationship you thought you could never live without – yet later you come to see that the right person was waiting, elsewhere, all the time. We might be banging our heads against the wall for years in the wrong profession – till we find that the right door for us is near at hand, and it was open all the time. To approach what looks like disaster in such a spirit of faith is to share the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane: believing that come what may, the Father's will, not his, would be best. This is to accept, of course, that the most profound successes we may ever attain, will sometimes take the shape of the Cross. Yet they bring with them, too, the joy of the resurrection, showing again and again, that in comparison with our own plans, God has something better in mind. Showing that our necessary, sometimes forced, changes of direction are often the only way to a better path than the one we first imagined for ourselves. Showing that apparent failure or misfortune is sometimes the only means by which we can learn unspeakably wonderful things which God had no other way of teaching us.

¹ All quoted in an article by Peter Snow, *Oxford Magazine*, Week Four, Hilary Term 2004.

² See Gomes's 'There is a Plan!' in the volume, *There is a Plan! - and other sermons preached at Harvard 1999-2000*, Vol. VI, printed for the University, Cambridge, Massachusetts [2000], pp. 237-44; for the above quote, see p. 238. Gomes's impressive sermon is likewise addressed to departing students and I am greatly indebted to him in the main point I have tried to make here.

Obvious as that may seem, on a nice June day when all is well, these things are useful to remember, in the times when we feel a bit like that street dog with three legs, one ear, and a broken tail. For reflection, and to close, words of thanksgiving written by an unknown Confederate soldier in the American Civil War:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I had asked for,
but everything that I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.³

³ *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, ed. George Appleton (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 119.