

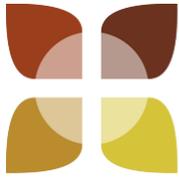


My parents adopted me when I was but an infant, mewling and puking up a storm. Later, they told me a good-hearted but highly unlikely story about how they came by me as opposed to any other child. My parents had a large choice, or so they said, a room full of babies in cots, a cornucopia of available infants. They walked from cot to cot. This one, perhaps, with the big ears? That one, with the adorable squint. Then we came to you and even before we'd peered in the bed, you stuck out your little hand and grabbed your father's finger. My parents thought this a comforting story. It wasn't. I never told them but this tale is truly terrifying. Since I was a child that worried, I thought of all the things that might have gone wrong. What if I'd been asleep? What if my arm had got trapped under the blanket? What if my father had had his hands in his pockets? My entire fate seems to have depended on nothing more than needing a quick stretch at exactly the same moment as some guy's hand was in the way. That's not reassuring; it's just random. A minute earlier, I was probably asleep; the next second the urge to stretch might have worn off. Now, if they'd said to me, "we looked for a boy about a foot long, with a complexion that would go with the wallpaper," I'd understand. That's rational, my parents would know what they were doing and so my particular destiny would sit steady on a sensible foundation. Here's another example. I first Suzy at a party. Not unusual, lots of people meet their future wives at parties. The thing is, though, I wasn't supposed to be at that party, I wasn't even invited. I was supposed to be at a concert but the band got stuck in traffic and the stand-ins started playing "Lovely Rita," which I detest, so I walked out. Just at that moment, a bus stopped at the lights. I got on, vaguely thinking it was going in the rough direction of a party I knew I could gatecrash. It's hardly surprising that I'm a basket case of anxiety. Four-two years of

marital happiness entirely dependent on a band who shouldn't have been playing, choosing a song they shouldn't have chosen, and a bus hitting a stop light at exactly the moment I'm on the kerb. Life really shouldn't be that haphazard. Thirty seconds later, I could have ended up an embittered, friendless bachelor with a pet tortoise called Steve.

When I worry about the seeming randomness of things and fear that God might rule the universe with a good deal more whimsy than I would advise, were I asked, my first thought is Thomas Aquinas. Thomas knows a thing or two about God, and you will not find a steadier thinker, one less tempted to theologise by free association or to riff off whatever bug-eyed gargoyle happened momentarily to distract him on his tramp round the cloister.

Surprisingly, though, Thomas is disconcertingly upbeat about the random serendipities on which our lives buck and jump like tumbling dice. God, he writes, wills some things to happen by "necessity." In our terms, we might say, events so statistically likely as to make no difference from a certainty. The slow traipse of the nebulae across the black immensities of space; the chemistries of water and wind that groove channels in the red rocks under a white sun; my food that without fail I smear down my front before an important meeting: such are the great necessities. You can bet your life on them. Other things, however, Aquinas goes on with unbecoming cheerfulness, God wills to happen contingently, or with an almost vanishingly low level of probability. Unlikely occurrences, events that might very easily have been quite different get jostled about by a myriad of other equally unlikely occurrences to produce, well, most of my life it appears, flourished like a purple rabbit from creation's conjuring hat. You got off the train at the wrong station, fell in love, and stayed



for years. You looked in a paper you'd never read before on a page you'd never bother with, and found a career. You're broke and hungry like never before and then get fed for nothing by a total stranger whom you never see again. One quick turn of unlikelihood and this seeming so, so solid world, dissolves upon a pin prick. We live from uncountable contingencies, a carnival of egregious happenstance, rolling chances that come out for good - and, yes, for bad, too. If Aquinas advises us rightly, however, God wills this creation of contingencies. Life, as a friend once said, resists planning and God himself has seen to that. The thing is, though, that God loves the world this way.

“The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes.” Poor Nicodemus. He slips out deep in the night wearing the gardener's turban. He checks he's not seen and sticks to the moon shadow. Three times round the block, then double-back, leave nothing to chance, you'll lose any tail and no eyes awake on a sudden and happening to peer from the bedroom window will catch you. Then, even after all that, Jesus tells him, “you're not safe. The Spirit blows where it wills.” You'll hear it alright, at the last moment, but you won't see the Spirit coming when it falls on you like a tiger and bears you off in its jaws, whither you do not know. This is how it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit: they are surprised. “How can this be?” asks Nicodemus, how can you shuffle off the certainties that pile up one day after another, the predictabilities, the regular doing of life, those daily necessities into which life must fit? How can you make free with it all and become as new? Not to mention that it all seems a bit random. How is it, asks Jesus, that you're a teacher in Israel and you still don't know this?



Was not Moses bundled in a basket down a running river, bumped around, nudged off papyrus and twisted round convolvulus and reed mace before coming to a pause in a patch of water lettuce, just at the moment where on a whim the daughter of Pharoah passed with her maids to bathe? Don't you remember, too, that Moses might have taken a dozen ways that day with his sheep but one fell behind while three others jogged into a gully and up to a hidden ridge, from which he, without any expectation, saw a tree full of fire. Then finally, Moses came to Israel, a people groaning under the dead certainties of slavery, day after day after day, where nothing could prepare them for the Spirit. Since Nicodemus seems not to have taken the message of such earthly happenings, Jesus wonders how he could now take in heavenly things. Heavenly things, like that couple who turn from the blocked road and the haphazard fall of the cliff, onto the wrong path, then go round in circles, and arrive too late, missing the room, to chance upon a stable.

“The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes.” Among the unpredictable chances of time, the events that mesh as if from nowhere and spawn other events that coil and jump and fall apart and re-form, bump and merge with new trains of occurrence, making up your life and mine, in all that the Spirit is at work. Calling, nudging, unsettling your ways, waiting for you at corners, the ones you didn't know you'd turn down: that, as Jesus says, is how it is “with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Surely, this explains why Jesus also sent out his disciples without bag or staff or money, not even a fish sandwich to their name. He would not have his followers dig themselves too deep in the world, or get too settled. Above all, he would not let them arm



themselves against chance, against moments that might not come again, against the Spirit nimbly inserting itself to juggle grace from the unexpected, the meeting, the coincidence for which they could not plan. Keep alert! Keep awake! Watch! Do not be afraid! Who is Jesus urging here? Not those who think themselves secure, not those who dream that the ice under their feet will never crack, not those who expect next year to bring nothing but the same tomorrow. Keep alert! Keep awake! Watch! Do not be afraid! Truly, these are instructions for people hopeful for change, who chance themselves upon generosity, who'll turn aside for the needy, who won't write their plans in stone, or get so busy the Spirit can't speak short of an earthquake. These commandments are for those who find God's call precisely when they slip off the road into byways and ditches, who praise God that their lives are made from motley cloth of chance events and windy paths, indeed, those who are so glad of this they keep looking out, awake, unafraid, watchful for the unknown whence and whither of the Spirit. In other words, these instructions are for you. Above all, for you about to be sent out under the Spirit's blessing. You shall receive that blessing, most of you, kneeling under ancient roofs on old stones. Don't be fooled by their pretensions to permanence, they, too, have an unknown future.

When Dante finally arrives at hell's core, its lowest and most abject degree, he sees Lucifer wrecked in the ice, trapped and frozen, his vast wings slowly and hopelessly flapping, while his jaws mash and grind without end. The once-lightsome archangel is now a mad mechanism turning on itself, producing nothing, changing nothing, forever. That's the Devil for you: the end of all happenstance, all chance of the unexpected turn. There's no happy



coincidence in hell, no improbabilities, never do events align crosswise and unpredictable. No hope in hell, just the Satanic mill, grinding away for nothing. All evil and all suffering tends toward this. Chance events, random connections, unpredictable outcomes. We know, of course, that not all of these issue in good, many, many don't. A myriad chances also pave the way to hell. That's the thing, though, suffering and evil reduce opportunity and smother our chances, sickness makes the world a lot smaller, our violence toward one another breaks connections, hobbles lives, excludes. If God's Spirit heads towards multitudes, raising life within its sparkling horizon, full of unpredictability, evil hunkers down, seeks a rigid control, identity, sameness, lockdown, we might say. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." Are you ready? Ready to take your chances as God throws them to you? Ready to speak the unlooked for word, the word of Jesus that always gives more than expected, always promises to take you whither you do not think or want to go? Thank goodness for that, by the way, since our own plans for life are never all they're cracked up to be. You are born of the Spirit. So your job is to let go a little your grip on security, on your need to have your time under management, in your hands and under your control. You calling is to watch out for the chances, those unforeseen moments, when you can risk loving beyond your strength, not knowing the outcome. Your duty is towards those for whom wickedness or ill fortune has reduced life to a cage. For them, you must be hope, because you know that the Spirit has yet more glory to break forth from fate and time. Thanks to the Spirit, you will live your lives in uncertainty, knowing surprise, wondering at how much love and forgiveness can spring on the worldx, glad not to see too far ahead:



caught to the end of your days in the mysterious whence and whither of the Spirit. And then what? Will heaven be surprising? Will heaven, do you think, have its randomness, moments of delight when something seems to come from nothing and confounds expectation? Will we laugh at how God's creative glory continually trumps what we bargained for? Will there still be chance in heaven? I rather think that there will.

Amen.

Revd Dr A P Gregory