

The Reality Beyond

2 Kings 8:1-6; Matthew 26:26-30
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
6th June 2010

Today is June 6 and, as you know, it is a very special day in history. That's because it marks the 66th anniversary of D-Day. The day of the Normandy landings on the north coast of France in 1944. The day that heralded the beginning of the end of the 2nd World War. The day that Western Allied Forces began their move into mainland Europe to liberate it from the Nazis. On that day, 150,000 troops – including 15,000 Canadians – were landed on the beaches of Normandy by a flotilla of boats. They braved landmines and fierce enemy gunfire but, despite this, established a toe-hold, then a beachhead, before moving inland. And, of course, the rest is history.

I don't know if you know but one of the most amazing coincidences took place just before D-Day in June 1944. In a very strange turn of events, during the 2 weeks prior to June 6, operational code-words – such as Overlord, Neptune, Mulberry, Utah, Omaha and Juno – all appeared as solutions to clues in the London Daily Telegraph crossword. MI5 investigated, thinking it was the work of Nazi spies. But they found it was simply an innocent choice of words by a crossword compiler, a high school teacher called Leonard Dawe.¹

There are some coincidences like this that we can believe in. They are just that and no more. An accidental concurrence of unrelated events. A set of random happenings. What some might call a synchronicity. A sequence of events that, although accidental, gives the appearance of having been planned or arranged.

But, there are other coincidences that are more difficult to believe in. I wonder if you have been following the case of Joran van der Sloot in the media over the past few days. This is the Dutch man who was alleged to have murdered Alabama teenager, Natalie Holloway, in Aruba 5 years ago. The authorities could never quite build a case against the arrogant and remorseless young man who constantly admitted the killing, then withdrew his confessions. Now, he has been accused of killing a young woman in Peru in similar circumstances. And his lawyer claims it is just a coincidence!² Maybe it is. But why do we seem to hear the words, “Yeah, right!” echoing in the back of our minds?

The Bible has quite a few instances of seeming coincidence in its pages but one of the most interesting is the one about which we read today in the Second Book of Kings. In an earlier chapter, there is a story of how the prophet Elisha brought back to life the young son of a woman at Shunem in the Galilee region of Israel. He also told her there was going to be a famine in the land and advised her, for the good of herself and her son, to leave the region for 7 years until it was over.

All these years later, it so happened that Gehazi, Elisha's servant, was talking to Ahab, the King of Israel in

the royal palace. The king particularly wanted to know about the healing miracles that Elisha had been carrying out. Gehazi told the king about Elisha's most remarkable miracle 7 years previously. How he had brought back to life a young boy, the son of a woman from Shunem. One gets the impression that the king was not totally convinced and Gehazi was looking for some way of verifying his account of this miraculous event. Just at that moment, who should walk into the palace but the Shunnamite woman who just happened to have returned to the country! And, of course, she was immediately able to corroborate the account of the healing Elisha had performed all these years earlier. Amazing, isn't it, that the woman came back just then at that most auspicious point in time?³

So how do we explain this biblical event? A story that reveals the working of God's hand? Or, a mere coincidence – an accidental occurrence? Or, could it be that the writer was using a little dramatic license to spice up the story? Or, are we just a tad sceptical because the confluence of events seems all too neat and tidy to ring true?

Today, when a strange occurrence happens in people's everyday lives, I think they tend mostly to be very sceptical, to treat it as just a coincidence and nothing more. It must be simply the laws of chance at work, they say, with similar permutations of occurrences randomly being thrown together. Just like when the matching symbols come up on a slot machine at the casino – something I know none of us have ever actually seen, never having ventured into such dens of sin! Or, just in the same way as the '649'⁴ winning combination could conceivably coincide with the numbers on the ticket we might buy – if, of course, any of us were to buy lottery tickets which I know, as good Presbyterians, we do not!

But the scepticism of so many people today regarding chance occurrences stretches further than events in their personal lives. They also seem to have come to treat Life itself as nothing more than an accidental matter. If chance events happen from day to day, they think, then maybe Life itself is nothing more than just that: one giant coincidence.

Many in the scientific community, of course, have argued this for a long time. That the origin of the universe is nothing more than a freak chemical reaction between some “protoplasmal, primordial, atomic globules”.⁵ In his book entitled *Full House*, palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould is at pains to show that the whole process of evolution is blind, that all changes in plants, animals and human beings over the centuries simply occur in response to local situations and that there is no global plan of progress at work for the betterment of human life. It is impossible, he concludes, to accept any system that assumes a master plan of creation. Mere chance is the basic cause of the development of life

on this planet.⁶

But, if our existence is nothing more than sheer coincidence, how do we account for such things as beauty? Can we watch a sunset and say that its ever-changing kaleidoscope of colours is simply the product of pure chance? Or, can we listen to the exquisite intricacy of a Mozart symphony and say that it is nothing more than an act of random nature? Or, what about the complex organism we call the human body, with its intricate network of muscles, nerves and organs, shall we conclude that it is merely the consequence of a haphazard occurrence? No, when you think about life from this point of view, you cannot help but agree with biochemist Edwin Conklin who once said that, "The probability of life originating from an accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged Oxford Dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop."⁷

We need to view life increasingly in this way, I believe. With the eyes of faith. Not that we accept that there is necessarily a deeper meaning behind each and every coincidental happening. Obviously, we have got to be very discriminating. But, more and more, in selected occurrences, in certain contexts, which seem on the surface to be simply matters of chance, we need to begin seeing the deeper and broader meaning within, behind and beyond such events. To see, in other words, the hand of God at work.

Jesus, of course, urged the disciples to do that very thing on the day of the Last Supper in the Upper Room. As he took the Bread and the Wine, he told them that, in future days, whenever they ate bread and drank wine, they would experience his presence with them, even though he had gone from their sight. And he encouraged them to see beyond the possibility of this being simply a coincidental happening, to see the spiritual gifts he was offering them that lay beyond the Bread and Wine.⁸

Isn't this exactly what we must do today as we come to the Lord's Table to celebrate the Sacrament? To see what we do with the eyes of faith? To see beyond the Bread and Wine to the spiritual realities that lie there? That it is no chance event. That Christ is "in, with and under"⁹ these holy elements because this is the way it has been planned and ordered. So that we may experience the life-sustaining presence and strength of Christ himself.

The eyes of faith. We need them not just here in church, of course. We need them also in our lives from day to day. Of course, we can look at the world without them. We can see it just as it is and interpret every inexplicable event, and even life itself, as nothing more than a random occurrence. How desolate life looks, though, when we see it this way! How bereft of meaning and hope and joy and love when we consider chance to be the foundation of all things! Seen in this way, truly, life is nothing more than a wilderness and dry land.

But when we look at life with the eyes of faith then suddenly it begins to open up with excitement and

possibility. Suddenly, the desert rejoices and the flowers bloom, and streams of water begin to flow.¹⁰ For then we begin to see that God is powerfully at work in this world causing those things to happen that, superficially, look like mere coincidences. Prayers are answered. Healing takes place. Loneliness is relieved. Sadness is comforted. Spirits are raised. The impossible becomes possible.

If you have been viewing what happens around you simply as a series of random occurrences, then I say to you today: Look again. Look with the eyes of faith and see the difference it makes. The wonderful difference that can't help but bring new joy to your heart and new hope to your soul.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Arthur Kosetler, *The Roots of Coincidence*, Random House, New York, 1972

² "Peru murder suspect to be expelled from Chile, Interpol says", www.cnn.com

³ 2 Kings 8:1-6 cf. also 2 Kings 4:1-37

⁴ Lotto 649, Ontario Lottery

⁵ W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*, D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, 1885

⁶ Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House*, The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin, Harmony Books, New York, 1996

⁷ cf. www.why-the-bible.com

⁸ Matthew 26:26-30; 1 Corinthians 11:23ff.

⁹ Luther's Small Catechism (1529), Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006

¹⁰ Isaiah 35:1ff.