

## THE BIG CHANCE

My grandmother came from a family who had never enjoyed a ripe old age. Both her parents and all her brothers and sisters had died at or before the age of seventy. At seventy herself, Nan was upright, sprightly and full of energy. She had no aches and pains, no signs of illness and could pack more into a day than most people half her age but still she did not expect to see her seventy-first birthday.

No, there was no point getting new glasses at her age.

No, it would be needless extravagance to buy a new carpet, even though the old one was getting threadbare. It was not worth it at her age.

She lived to be ninety-three and although she did eventually concede to new glasses, she never did consent to a new carpet. The amazing thing was that she did not die of a broken neck, given the death-trap that the old carpet had become.

Nan had not expected to live into her nineties. She had no role models in her family and did not know quite what to make of old age. She enjoyed those extra years but this expectation of waiting-to-go-at-any-moment never quite left her.

Monica Dickens wrote in one of her novels of a boarding house filled with rather sad people, all waiting for something: *Mrs Lewin was waiting for her Canadian husband to send for her; Miss Willys was waiting for a man..; Old Mr and Mrs Parker were waiting for their daughter to ask them to go up north and live with her; Miss Rawlings was waiting for her mother to die....; Mr Dangerfield, who was the MC at the Palace Ballroom was waiting for the summer season to begin.*

All of these people had their lives “on hold.” They were doing nothing but wait.

I suppose that in most lives there is this sense of limbo at some time, when you are unable to plan or to make decisions because you are waiting for something to happen. Sometimes the limbo is short-term like waiting for exam results; waiting for a job interview; waiting for work to be finished on your house; waiting for a cataract to be dealt with so that you can drive the car again.

But sometimes it is long-term: a period of unemployment that lasts years rather than weeks; or an illness which requires long sessions of waiting for appointments, waiting for diagnoses, waiting for treatment, waiting for operations, waiting for more diagnoses; or a massive crisis that sends you into a state of shock and you just go through the motions of life, waiting to feel anything like “normal” again.

If you can picture this state of suspended animation, when you cannot move on in life because you are waiting for something to happen which you cannot make happen, you will understand something of the atmosphere in the early church. Many of those first Christian men and women had put their lives on hold. They were waiting; waiting for Jesus to return to the earth. All they talked about was when would he come and what would happen when he did. All they prayed about was *come back, Lord Jesus*. They gave up their homes and their livelihoods in readiness. Those who were not married refused to marry because it was not worth starting a family when time was so short. They waited.... and they waited.

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It is difficult to establish precisely what Jesus said about returning. Theologians have argued about this for centuries, some insisting that yes, Jesus definitely promised to return to the earth during his disciples’ lifetime and others saying no, people had

misunderstood him. It is true that the Jewish religion had encouraged people to look for the “Day of the Lord:” a time when God would intervene in human history. After all, they traced their history as a nation back to that dramatic Exodus from Egypt, when God called a great leader to rescue his people from slavery; unleashed horrific disasters on their enemies; and performed miracles to get them across the sea and safely through the desert.

When, centuries later, the people were carried off into exile or left in their own country under foreign occupation, they looked for a similarly dramatic event. God would intervene again. He would shatter mountains, dry up rivers, bring forth water in the wilderness and kick the Persian and Babylonian Kings into oblivion. This would be the “Day of the Lord” and that expectation had become a central part of the religion into which Jesus was born. So it is possible that some people, listening to what Jesus said about his future role in their lives would have interpreted it in the light of this tradition.

But whatever Jesus said or did not say, the fact remains that, thirty years after his ministry, many of his followers had put themselves into a state of practical and spiritual limbo just waiting for him to return and, so far as St Paul was concerned in that letter he wrote, this was not doing them a lot of good.

It is frustrating in the extreme to feel that your life is “on hold” while you wait for something to happen over which you have no control. But, let’s be honest; living in limbo can also become a form of escapism, a means of opting out of life. A difficult relationship, a challenge in your job, a complex social injustice that is brought to your attention, a need to make serious changes in your home and lifestyle, problems with your commitment to the church- you have a cast-iron excuse to put all these kind of complications on hold because you are waiting for something to happen.

I’ve done it.... and I bet you have as well.

Life for the early Christians was hard, very hard. They had lived all their lives under the harsh rule of the Roman Empire, which treated non-Roman citizens with contempt. The Christian church was looked on with growing suspicion and the threat of active persecution grew stronger every day. The first churches were filled with a very diverse and confused set of believers trying to make sense of this new faith and those churches were not comfortable places to be. So the challenge to live a full, happy, useful life, serving God and your community under all these circumstances was a huge one. How could you possibly do it? Opting out of life and simply waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus became a form of escape from a difficult existence.

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This sitting-around-and-waiting attitude was not something Jesus had ever encouraged and that story about the servants with gifts to use in their Master’s absence bears this out. Those servants, in one sense, were in a state of limbo. Their Master had gone away and they had no means of knowing when he would return. Two of them got on and used the gifts he had left with them- one more successfully than the other but then he had had more to start with. It was the third who got into trouble because he had done nothing except sit and wait, his gift carefully hidden, until his Master got back. He was afraid of getting something wrong, of getting involved in something he could not handle, so he opted out altogether and just waited.

I remember being in a shop once, which was run by a married couple. There was quite a long queue but both husband and wife were serving the customers so I hoped that we would not be too long. But it turned out that this woman could not do anything on her own initiative. All she kept saying was “*I shall have to ask my husband*” so you had to wait until he was free to get anything done. I never heard her say anything else: it was like a stuck record: *I’ll-have-to-ask-my-husband-I’ll-have-to-ask-my-husband*. She had no confidence in her own judgement nor in her own ability and although this total dependence on her husband may have boosted his ego for a while, I can’t help thinking that it must have got on his nerves to spend all day, every day with this endless refrain: *I’ll-have-to-ask-my-husband-I’ll-have-to-ask-my-husband* and nothing ever getting done.

This kind of helplessness; this inertia was not what the Master in Jesus’ story wanted, nor was it what he expected of his servant. He wanted this man to use and to develop the gifts he had been given; to grow in confidence and enjoy the thrill of achievement.

Jesus was not an unreasonable man. He knew the kind of life his people were living. He knew how restricted they were by external powers over which they had no control. He knew their deep hope for the “Day of the Lord,” when everything would be alright again and they would get their “Big Chance” to prove themselves as God’s people. But the point, Jesus said, was that “Big Chances” to prove themselves God’s people were there all the time. Your big chance was not about grabbing political power and taking revenge on your enemies. It was about revealing the love, the compassion, the mercy and the justice of God in the place where you were. It was about living with a far greater power than ordering everybody else around because it was about living in the light of God’s wisdom and at peace with yourself. It was about experiencing the reality of God in the world, a reality which did not depend on external circumstances, which was what made it so very, very powerful.

This sitting around in a state of limbo, waiting for God to do something big and decisive in the political sense, was doing his people no good. And in later years, this same sitting in limbo, waiting for Jesus to return and do something dramatic, would do his followers no good. Firstly, it became an excuse to opt of the everyday challenges of life and withdraw into a hard- line religious ghetto and secondly it held them back from recognising the involvement of the living Jesus Christ in their lives day after day and from taking up the power of the Holy Spirit to work for the kingdom of God on earth right now.

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A lady called Molly Hughes wrote her autobiography about growing up in Victorian London. Her family had a lot of bad times, one of the worst of which was the death of her younger brother, quite suddenly, at the age of twenty-six. But, in visiting the school where he had been a teacher and being taken to his grave in the nearby churchyard, Molly met and fell deeply in love with the man who was to become her husband. She remembered then some of the final words of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; ominous-sounding words, pointing out that there was still a door to hell, even at the very gates of heaven. But, said Molly, she had now found the opposite to be true as well, that there was a door to heaven, even at the very gates of hell.

She is not the only one to have discovered this. Other people have found that even in their worst times, they have experienced a glimpse of heaven and of God. Others have found that, even in what seem to be their weakest moments, they have performed

some service for God. John McCarthy found himself suddenly surrounded by the light, the warmth, the joy of God in his prison cell; Anne Frank produced a masterpiece of inspiration to hope, love and peace, whilst living in hiding from the Nazis; George Macleod received his vocation to found the Iona Community when Scotland was still reeling under the aftermath of the First World War, experiencing the horrors of the Depression and when the Christian church was losing credibility among the people by the hour.

The Big Chances are always there; no matter what our circumstances or what our particular gifts. The reality of God is around us and the opportunity to serve God is open to us. We only have to believe: believe in God and believe in ourselves.

In a few moments our Pathfinder group are coming into church to share some stories of the Persecuted Church with us, to lead us in prayer and to ask for our help. Maybe this is just one small opportunity for you to do something for God that could make a huge difference to Christian men and women elsewhere and to the church all over the world. Who knows? Even saying a prayer and signing a petition ~~It~~ has got to be better than just sitting and sighing over the horror stories of tortured, ~~and~~ imprisoned Christians and saying what can we do?

I see on the Notice sheet that volunteers are still being sought to help with distributing the church flowers- no more than four times a year and nearly always to people in the Orpington area. It is hardly setting the world on fire but it is a form of Christian ministry which I have known to produce amazingly far-reaching effects.

*The Big Chance, said St Paul, will come suddenly, like a thief in the night. There is no need for you to sit in darkness so that this time should take you by surprise. You are children of light and children of the day. God did not intend us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation. So keep on encouraging one another and building each other up.*

*Don't just sit and wait.*

*Amen*