



Life is like that, isn't it?

You make your plans, you have your dreams and something or somebody throws a spanner in the works. Not just once, but over and over again.

Magazine articles continuously advise us on how to create a life-plan, a work plan, a relationship plan: how to be where you want to be this time next year. All it takes, they say, is willpower and confidence.

Of course it does. Until your child has problems at school or your elderly mother develops dementia or your place of work is relocated to a venue four hours' journey away, or your partner has an affair or your house is discovered to be full of dry rot or you turn out to have a serious illness which is going to need months of treatment.

Magazine articles tend to work on the premise that life is basically fair and straightforward but unfortunately life is neither of these.

Things happen for which we are not prepared. "*Events, dear boy, events.*"

Other people cannot or will not work to our agenda.

We ourselves are not as invincible as we thought we were.

Which is why it is no good preaching today about "New Year Resolutions" or "Dreams and Visions," or "Planning your life for 2008," because I know as well as anyone else here that dreams, plans and resolutions nearly always end up broken.

And then we get cross.

We are cross with ourselves because we feel that we have failed.

We are cross with life because it keeps presenting us with these "events."

We are cross with other people because they keep getting in the way of our plans.

And the search for God is no exception.

Millions of human beings have embarked on a quest for God. They have felt convinced that there is a higher power, a greater being in the universe. And they have wanted to find this power, understand it and experience it in their lives.

Many have taken the path of religion- an organisation in which people encourage one another in the search for God. But religion can let us down. It can become narrow in its thinking, greedy for power and money, divided within itself, and can end up putting people off God altogether.

So some take a solitary path- preferring to think their own thoughts, make their own prayers, pursue their own quest for God. But they often let themselves down. Without the structure, support and discipline of a community, their quest for God just peters out as life and its events take them over.

And some try the path of knowledge, putting their trust in scientific evidence: sooner or later the truth about God will emerge. But even in the field of science, there are disagreements and something which was proved to be true in one generation will be shown to be not true in the next. So where does that leave you?

The quest for God becomes complicated. Whichever way we take, it is not the straight path we hoped it would be. Something always seems to be holding us back from knowing God fully and completely. And we think how much better a Christian I could be if I had more time, if I had less trouble in my life, if my family were believers, if I knew more, if I found a better church, if I had a better minister.

And we get cross.

And we feel, like Artaban, that life and the human race together seem to be conspiring to hold us back from finding God.

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On my parents' Ruby Wedding Anniversary, my father arranged for forty red roses to be delivered to my mother at home. The timing was not brilliant because the florist arrived just as mother was cleaning the bathroom and she opened the front door to receive her red roses wearing rubber gloves and clutching a lavatory brush. This, she felt, detracted somewhat from the romance of the moment.

But it did not matter. The red roses, although a charming gesture, did not matter. She did not need this gift, nor the party which followed to tell her that she had succeeded in her marriage. It was the years of love and loyalty, the long and often painful journey through better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health which mattered. It was the journey which had built the relationship. The anniversaries, the gifts, the "prizes," were no more than brief staging posts.

The search for God is about the building of a relationship. It is not a piece of knowledge to be worked out. It is not an award of merit for good behaviour. It is not the successful creation of a perfect church. It is an ongoing relationship of love and trust which is built up through mistakes and failures, through excruciating pain and tormenting doubt. Everything which happens to us in life- the better and the worse, the richer and the poorer, the sickness and health- is an opportunity to know God better because God is the path as well as the prize.

It is good to have ambitions. Even if you do not always reach them, it does you good to have something to aim for. As George Herbert said in one of his poems, you shoot much higher if you aim at the moon than if you only aim at a tree. And if you have a worthy ambition for 2008 then good luck and God bless you.

But my deepest prayer for us all today is that during this year ahead, no matter what happens to us, in us and around us, we may come to know God a little more clearly as each day goes by.

Amen.