

**“God’s Hidden Purpose”**

**(Matthew 3.13-17)**

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***Introduction: The Text***

I’m always interested in the ‘little things’ the Gospels choose to record... given there’s so much they *don’t* say. Like today’s story... Matthew tells us of a fascinating interchange between Jesus, before his ministry has begun... and John the Baptist.... Jesus presents to John for baptism, just like anyone else... but John, recognising who this is, balks at the idea and says, *‘This is the wrong way around. You should be baptising me!’* Jesus answers, *“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.”* (NRSV) Which Eugene Peterson translates, *“Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.”* (MSG)

This is the faith of Christ Jesus, the faith that carries him through his ministry to the cross... *‘Trust that God knows what He’s doing. Go with it... don’t fight it!’*

***“When I get to Heaven...”***

When things aren’t turning out the way *I’d* like, I mock myself by saying (in an exaggerated way)... *‘When I get to heaven I’m going to have stern words with God about how he’s organised all this. I’ve got a long list of improvements... how he could manage this life-business so much better!’* Of course it’s a joke at my own expense... When I come into the direct presence of God at the end of this life, I’ll be rendered totally silent – it will be awe and worship... repentance and tears of remorse and gratitude. I know that... but there *is* a big part of me that agrees with John the Baptist... *‘Hold on! Surely this isn’t right. There’s got to be a better way. What if we...’*

In the typical arrogance of humanity, I do often think I know better than God... a better way. *‘It **should** happen like this. It should be easier... quicker... more obvious and direct.’* In many of the big things of life, especially when they’re painful and difficult, I really struggle to see

the action and the purpose of God – they are hidden to me. And this hiddenness is a real challenge to my faith.

### ***God's Purpose***

In today's gospel Jesus says to John, '*Get on with it will you. Stop trying to change things. God knows what He's doing in this.*' It is a faith that trusts in God's purpose and action, even when it's not immediately obvious.<sup>1</sup> It is a faith that says *everything is coming together as intended.*

Our faith teaches that life is not merely a set of random and meaningless accidents. There is a BIG purpose present – there is an evolving and active *will* at the heart and centre of all life... in everything that happens. What God has begun in creation, God *will* complete... God *will* bring to fulfilment.

### ***A Plan?***

Notice that I'm using the word '*purpose*' and intentionally avoiding using the word '*plan*'. '*Plan*' could be used, but I don't want to activate that literalistic and mechanistic association peddled by fundamentalist religion and widespread amongst many Christians. You know the one... '*I got a park right outside the hospital because it was part of God's plan for me.*' That sense that God has a fixed script for us that determines everything we do down to the smallest detail. I don't believe that...

My dad died when I was 17 – that was *not* God's plan for me but rather the consequence of my father's weak heart and extensive war injuries. My first marriage collapsed when I was 30 – that was a result of bad choices from two young people and had nothing to do with God's plan for me. In everything there is the wildness of life, always unexpected. Stuff happens... sometimes you get a car park and sometimes you don't. That stuff *is* quite random. And there is also that amazing freedom of humanity to do mad and evil things... to

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<sup>1</sup> The other readings selected for today support this... In Acts (10.34-43) we hear Peter passionately proclaiming the purpose of God in Christ's ministry and calling the church into being – God is active and is bringing all things to fulfilment. It's really strong in *Isaiah* (42.1-9) too... '*I am God, and I am telling you what I'm doing.*'

sin... that is, to go in a completely opposite direction to the desire of God. So going back to my examples... it was not God's plan that World War 2 occurred – that was human sin and madness. It was not God's plan that I should enter into a marriage without careful discernment – that was my responsibility. So I'm intentionally using the word *purpose*... and staying away from '*plan*'.

God has a *purpose* for all creation, including you and me... but it's a BIG and a DEEP purpose... in which individual happenings can go in any 'random' direction. God's purpose for us is that we will come into a perfect union of intimate love... with the Holy Trinity and with all creation... that all will be ONE. The rest is mere detail... it's not scripted or defined. What the faith says is that in *everything*... even that which is a sinful denial of the will of God... in *everything* God is present and active, working to bring us to the fulfilment intended at the beginning of time. Regardless... God's purpose *will* come to fruition.

### ***Creator and Creatures***

But the tradition also teaches that much of God's action and purpose in any given event... will be hidden to us... we won't be able to see it. This hiddenness may challenge and frustrate us, but it simply needs to be accepted. We should indeed look at everything with careful discernment, looking to see what God is doing, but always with that awareness, that much will be hidden to our finite vision. We need to remember that we are creatures... we are not gods.

Holy Scripture records a continuing narrative of humanity's unwillingness to accept our place in creation – from the apple in the Garden of Eden to executing the Christ on a cross – we always think we should be in control because we know better than God. The same story of human wilfulness plays out in our lives today... always trying to manufacture our own happiness, always trying to force life (and others) to comply with our understanding of how things should be.

### ***Conclusion***

The Christian faith teaches a very different path... God has a purpose and is active in all things to bring this purpose to fulfilment. God can be denied in the small details of our human choices, but this big and ultimate purpose of God cannot fail. Our response as people of faith, is to live in trusting openness to whatever comes. Yes, we practise discernment; yes we resist evil; yes we choose that which is good and true, but in the end we are creatures. Much of what God is doing is hidden to us. And we control so very little... indeed we create nothing. Much of life comes to us without us having any capacity to influence it. In faith we simply respond... as well as we can... in trust and in hope.

When life is happy and smooth, it's easier to go with the flow... although many of resist even then. But when life is hard... tough... painful... and we can't see '*why*', then it is much harder to trust in God's evolving purpose. The choice of faith is, do we rail against it... fight against it... allow it to embitter us. Or do we trust and hope, that even in this, this that we find so hard, God is at work... and God's ultimate purpose is being fulfilled.