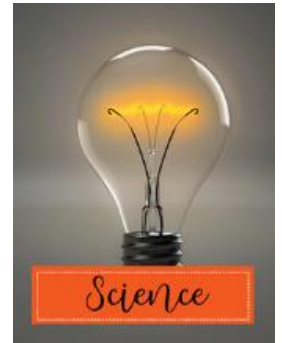


Thoughts from the Manse 5th February 2021

I have been pondering this week on the importance of the phrase 'what if' in our approach to life. It is such a simple phrase and yet it can rule our life. Science is built on 'what if', exploration of possibilities begins when someone says I wonder what will happen if I do this. As children most of us learnt by exploring what happens if, sometimes the lesson was a hard one but often it resulted in a rich discovery, even the discovery of life's path as we realised something that fired us with enthusiasm and purpose. It happens all the time, the artist says what if I mix this colour with that, the chef explores what happens if he adds another flavour or combines different ingredients together, and new and wonderful things are discovered alongside the occasional disaster.



The problem arises when we allow 'what If' to limit, if one disaster stops us exploring, or the fear of possibilities prevents us following a path that could take us to a new world. Prevarication can lead to a negative approach to 'what if', a negative approach to life as we seek to remove risk, forgetting that as children risk was the adventure, and still is the adventure if we choose to explore the possibilities before us. I suspect the key to a healthy relationship with 'what if' is knowing yourself, understanding what is important and why, and then living life to the full, accepting that sometimes on a journey we must retrace our steps when we discover we have chosen the wrong path. However, we also need to recognize that even on the wrong path there are things to discover and things to treasure which we may not have seen if we had not taken that path.



I am concerned that in today's world, especially our developed world, many children are discouraged from exploring possibilities, or not encourage to 'take a chance'. I see it now in the attitude to the disruption of schooling. Children thrive in groups and being unable to mix with friends at school is unfortunate, and we do need to be aware of the effect on mental health. However, should we, instead of encouraging panic as loss of learning ask, what if every child simply repeats a year of school? It might be radical, but would it be any more of a disaster than the panicked regrouping we currently see? It would at least provide some certainty.

I remember writing a prayer for the 1998 URC Prayer Handbook in which I wondered 'what if'...

What if Abraham hadn't served the strangers?
What if Moses had ignored the burning bush?
What if the Mary hadn't heard the angel?
What if Jesus had declined death on the cross?

What if Christ is here, homeless, without food?
What if Christ is here, living in our town?
What if Christ is standing outside our closed Church doors?
What if Christ is the child who won't sit down?



In the prayer I pondered how often we ignore God and God's call as we barge through life on yet another important mission, failing to recognise opportunities placed before us. How often we forget to take the moment to wonder and instead spend all our energy in eliminating risk and turning the adventure of life into the treadmill of life.

In the past year we have been forced into stillness, often reluctantly, but it has given us the time to wonder and we must take our discoveries with us as we move out of stillness, treasuring the things we have seen on this path we never intended to take.