

When we are distracted, we make mistakes. When we are frightened, we make mistakes. When we are stressed (as anyone who overheard me trying to play piano at trebles rehearsals can tell you), we make mistakes. When we are both distracted, stressed and frightened, better stand well clear because it's going to get messy. Les Dawson, eat my ivories.

And we are distracted, stressed and frightened for much of our lives.

If we're really lucky nobody will be there to notice when, driven to distraction, we commit our *faux pas*. If fortune smiles on us we can quickly mop up the mess before anyone stops being preoccupied and notices that we were too busy thinking about checking Twitter that we left the top off the blender and coated the kitchen in smoothie; if we're a little less lucky our mistake might cause us social embarrassment but nothing else, mistakes such as sporting our cool new kit with the price label left on, tucking our skirt into our knickers (you can do it with a cassock too), trying to drink coffee without first removing the face mask, buying a Cliff Richard calendar or offering to put up three tents when the guru you've been following turns out to be God and you catch him chinwagging with Moses and Elijah. A small embarrassment might even improve your social standing a little as people look at you blithely sporting a sample of your most recent meal on the front of your jumper and think: there but for the grace of God...

Unfortunately, not all mistakes we make are benign and being distracted, frightened and stressed can lead us into some dark places indeed. So much of what we do without thinking in everyday life is incredibly dangerous- operating machinery, driving cars, crossing roads: one moment of inattention, and things can rapidly spiral into nightmare. The phone rings, we leave the chip pan on the hob to answer. The phone rings, we take our eyes off the road to see who it is. Next stop, 70s public information film. Forget health and safety for the time-being (like the scaffolders) and stressed, distracted and frightened we turn defensive, raise our backs, lash out with our claws, hurt those around us, friend and stranger alike; swamped with our own pain we neglect the pain of others, who then lash out at us, and down we plummet, ever down.

We are distracted, stressed and frightened for much of our lives and when we are distracted, stressed and frightened we make poor decisions which means we make mistakes. Of course we do.

If we allow ourselves to become distracted from the things of the Spirit, allow ourselves to neglect our lives of worship and prayer, forget that we are beings of both body and soul; then we've entered a whole new ball game of mistake, because waiting there to take advantage of our inattention are the forces of evil, all those things in life which build barriers between us and God. Take our eyes off the ball and we've launched ourselves down the helter skelter to Hell. You weren't expecting that turn were you?

Now, it isn't necessary to think of evil as embodied: little red creatures with horns and hooves actively seeking your downfall. It's probably not a very helpful way for us in the 21st century to think of evil- something that is in reality an absence, a void, a no-thing, an absence of good rather than a presence of not good. But we've all sometimes felt that the inanimate appears to have a life of its own: a gadget refusing to work, a lock not budging, a paper dropped in the street that blows out of reach the second we bend down to pick it up, a jar that won't open till we swear at it. It's almost as if it was listening... Pity the pickles in the Rectory. So I'll stick with the metaphor and say that if there's not *actually* a little imp hanging round under the window box just waiting to tempt us into taking one more step down the slippery slope and it's all just circumstance it *actually* doesn't really matter, because the end result is the same. We find ourselves just that little bit further away from God.

The end of Mozart's Don Giovanni, is tremendously exciting, and however farcical the preceding scenes, the last act is the highest drama imaginable, as right there on stage the pits of hell open and the unrepentant Lothario is pitched headfirst into the fiery furnace. Gripping stuff, peerless music. But it doesn't happen like that. We're not minding our own business one day and find ourselves dragged down to the inferno by a walking statue the next. The road to hell is walked in baby steps while we're too busy reading the texts on our smartphone phones to see where we're going; too distracted to notice we're slowly sliding down the slippery slope. And the soundtrack is not Mozart, but somebody trying and failing to play the piano because you're listening.

Now I'm one of those people that hold the rather attractive belief that Hell is a real place, but it's empty. One of those who have reasoned that a loving God is not going to delight in lavishing care on his children, counting every hair on their heads, carrying them through the quicksands of life and dropping everything to go find them when they're lost only to consign them to everlasting torment when they shuffle off the mortal coil because they didn't tick all the boxes. The good shepherd that searches for us when we stray will surely give us every chance to return to the fold-

even when we have crossed the bar, even if it means strong-arming us onto his shoulders and transporting us bodily. And so attractive to the soul is its creator that when we finally lose our distractions nobody, not even the most reprobate, will turn away from God. How could we? See sometimes, theology can be beautiful.

But if, maybe, possibly, none of us will face Hell, we will surely face ourselves; we will gaze on the Divine Majesty and then look at the lives we have lived and a sword will pierce our soul, a blade of exquisite regretful anguish for the times we did not look upon God, but, distracted, looked the other way. And maybe the fewer distractions that lure us now, the sweeter that heartache will be. So, important question. What are the distractions we need to avoid so we don't make the mistakes that lead us to *that* place? Well I'm not going to tell you. I can't: because they will be different for each of us. Not for this sermon those Pauline lists of :

*'fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these'*

Now obviously these are all good things to avoid, but it's not really enough to tick off the things we've avoided, because we're not all going to be susceptible to them to the same degree. As I've said before I can hand on heart say I've never coveted my neighbour's wife, but as I'm sure you'll agree, that doesn't really make me any holier than thou. Just tempted to sin in, erm, different ways. Listing things to avoid isn't going to work because we're never going to have a complete list, and anyway, avoiding all the bad stuff isn't going to make us good, just not bad, which is not the same thing.

I am repeating the crux of sermons past I know but being a Christian is about what we *are* rather than what we *are not*. So instead of concentrating on avoiding the bad stuff, concentrate instead on the good stuff, and... lots of the bad stuff will just sort of drop away. If nothing else, your life has finite bounds, and if it is chocca with good things, there's less room for the bad. And if there's always a risk in life of barrelling onto the downward spiral of mistakes and distraction, well there's a heavenward spiral too. Moving on the up escalator might mean deliberately thinking about the things of God; being regular at worship; trying to be dutiful in prayer; devoting a portion of your resources to the furthering of the Kingdom; going out and finding good works to do rather than reacting when opportunities occur, things like these. Nothing more arduous really than marshalling your time and setting your priorities.

In times of fear and stress, it gets bad. It can get really bad. We all have a cross to bear, all have our share of suffering. But. Beyond the suffering, behind the opaque veil of distraction is the moment of transfiguration. Infinitely close, the reality of life's holiness is exposed in a moment of dazzling revelation. When we are at our least distracted we feel its presence even if it is always somehow tantalisingly out of reach. Yet somehow, somehow the soul knows that beneath and beyond the surface of our fear and distraction blazes the very glory of God.