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What if? What if eh? Just imagine it? Get your head round that? What if!

We love to speculate, to consider what might have been, what might be waiting round the corner, even, sometimes, to dream of the future or ponder the past. What if...?

What if Jeremy Corbyn wins the election? What if Boris Johnson renews his Downing Street tenancy? What if Jo Swinson is the next prime minister. OK, maybe not that one. Sometimes you just don't have enough imagination.

What if? What if ? Whatever it is we're mulling, we're not indulging in idle woolgathering. No. We're like that hamster running round and round. Yes, it's not going anywhere- ever- but that's not the point: Hammy's keeping fit and building up his muscles ready for the moment he can make a run for it, hopefully biting his captors first. 'Whatif'-ing is our mental hamster's wheel, keeping ready our vital capacity for abstract thought, which is one of those uniquely human things like grammar, machinery, music, mirrorballs and keeping pet hamsters that don't just put us into a different page to our animal cousins, but blast us clean out the bestiary.

So, we can play with ourselves and not feel embarrassed if we're playing the game of 'what if'. It's building our brains, see. Helping us make sense of decisions we've made; helping us process the emotions, prepare better for next time and, you know, just feel a bit better about the hand we've been dealt because we know it could have been a different one. And when we've learned those lessons, learned, marked and inwardly digested 'em, we can run round the wheel of possible fortunes in our head first before we leap in next time. What if I do this? What if their response is that? Maybe, just maybe, with 'what if' in our armoury, we'll make a better choice. What if? What if I'd stayed home? What if I'd married the other one instead? What if I'd taken the job in Upminster? What if I'd noticed the speed camera?

OK, so that is starting to make us sound a bit self-obsessed and too much gazing at your own navel makes us all rather dull (though not as dull as if we decide to tell somebody else about our umbilicus), but we can still give the old grey stuff a 'what if' workout by thinking about other people's lives. Make it less personal though, make us less likely to lose the few friends we've got and give it a gloss of academia by musing about what might have been different if history hadn't happened the way it did. Of course we could just pick of a Celeb magazine and ruminate on the lives of the vacant, but where's the fun in that? History it is then.

What if Henry the Eighth's first wife had given birth to a boy, and he'd lived? For one, three women would have enjoyed substantially longer lives than they did. And there would have been no Church of England. So either I'd be out of a job, or instead of pouting at you from the pulpit I'd be up there behind a screen muttering something in Latin and you'd be there rattling your rosaries. If the boy had lived. What if?

What if Napoleon had won Waterloo? C'est vrai, non? Who knows what effect a French Europe would have had on the future. Would we have been worse drivers and better lovers? What if? If this island had become a Gallic province, the steak and kidney pie in a tin would have never been invented, that's for sure.

What if the long arm of the law had caught Teresa May running through the wheat fields? Charged her with criminal damage and sentenced her to the young offenders institution she would have gone to if she'd committed her criminal damage at a bus shelter in Brixton? Would the world be a different place now right here, right now?

What if Alexander Fleming had been better at keeping his petri-dishes clean, or nobody had thought to make a wheel or invent the steam engine? What if Mozart had tripped up making his way from the crib to the clavier and died in childhood, or Lennon and McCartney never met, or Andrew Lloyd Webber had once in his life, just once, written a decent tune? On and on you can go. What if?

We can play these games with the Bible stories too, after all we reckon them to be history of a sort.

So.

What if Moses had decided to run like hell from the burning bush when it started talking? I mean you would, wouldn't you?

What if Mary had said 'You know what, thanks all the same but I've heard pregnancy can be a bit of a pain and I think I'm happy as I am'?

What if there *was* room at the Inn? What if Paul had decided to take up gourd growing instead of persecuting and never set foot on the road to Damascus? What if he was born in Peckham and instead of setting off on missionary journeys to all those tongue-twisting club-Med destinations he went to Margate and set up a whelk stall? What if?

There is a serious point here. Although professional historians tend to sniff at ‘what if’ games, thinking about possible alternative pasts does effectively demolish the notion that history is all about getting us to where we are now, that curiously conceited notion that the past has a direction and, if you like, a purpose: the belief that humans *progress*. We’ll know for certain that isn’t true on December 13th, but that’s how we are usually taught history, as a version of that *Ascent of Man* picture: all-fours chimp at one end, two-legged chump at the other. From superstition to enlightenment; from subsistence to surplus, the past an inevitable progression towards bigger and better, smarter and more sophisticated. When we write it down we make history a story and somewhere in the process of putting it on paper we make it seem inevitable. The first half of the 20th century should have knocked that optimism of us. But the march of progress is a tough habit to kick.

History really is just one thing after another. It never had to be that way, but it was. It could have been a hundred different ways, but it wasn’t. There isn’t a plan. Of course there isn’t: this is the history of humans after all. The closest humans ever get to a plan is ‘well something will turn up’. Which is no plan at all.

So. History. In hindsight it was always going to happen that way; in reality it never was.

We should know from the story of our own lives that everything is chance, nothing is inevitable, nothing is set in stone. Too true, we don’t have the power to change our fates, but they can change, they do change. We deep down and right up top know, that but for the brush of a particular butterfly’s gossamer wings, it would *all* have been different.

So when we look back, we might see a pattern in events, but that’s just because we’re looking for one: it’s not really there, there is no pattern in the past, it’s just grains of rice falling on the floor. If we look forward, we can’t reliably know what’s going to happen tomorrow, never mind next year and certainly not where this all ends up.

The one exception to this near-universal rule of human history is the reason you’re here today: after all it’s not *that* cold and it’s not *that* interesting a building. Salvation history is different. It’s not human history but human-and-God history, and that added three letter word makes all the difference. Randomness rules down here: but

there is a clear pattern in all this. To see it, though, you have to be looking from heaven.

The relationship between God and humanity *is* heading towards a goal in the way that human history on its own is not. God and us is *not* one chance thing after another. But only rarely does any sense of this impinge on our lives: a glimpse of something indistinct just beyond the corner of our eye here; an inexplicable feeling of something ‘other’ there.

We don’t notice the forward propulsion of salvation just as we don’t notice that the ground we are standing on is hurtling through space at an unimaginable speed, spinning as it goes like a fairground waltzer. But it surely is. Hold tight now.

So, in this season of Advent, as the whistle blows for the kick off of the church year; as we’re building ourselves up to fever pitch for the birth of all births; at this time of birth and beginnings, so the focus of our worship is on the end.

Because in salvation history, the beginning and the end— and all the bits in between— are the same thing. All of time and history has been and is and will be striving, reaching, yearning for the one goal, all working to the same end, all heading the same way, all converging on the consummation of God’s loving purpose for his creation.

Most times we never see beyond the pell-mell carousel spin of our lives; never imagine anything beyond our one-damn-thing-after-another personal history. We wouldn’t; we’re right in the middle of it and so ‘it’ is all we can see; up, down; right, left; before, behind whichever way we look. But above and beyond the merry-go-rounds of our lives, God is working his purpose out.

And every spin of the wheel we move closer. No more ‘but’s. No more ‘what if’s. The time is drawing near.