

January 2012. It almost certainly means nothing to you. But for me it is etched in my memory, as vivid a scar as the welcome-to-Croydon gouged out by a Hermes lorry on the side of my car. It wasn't quite my *annus horribilis*- that sort of thing only happens to royalty or those who have lingered too long sitting on a cold hard surface- but whatever the pretentious term is for 'crap month', January 2012 was it.

First, Xin my dog managed to notch up four visits to the vets in a space of two weeks, suffering from vomiting of indeterminate cause but probably the result of swallowing, in one go, a turkey neck. My mother, on Boxing day had put it out in her garden for 'the birds', which either suggests that vultures are indigenous to rural Suffolk or she's watched too many Hitchcock movies. Anyway, Xin saw it and swallowed it whole before it could be snatched away. A cool £400 in straight-after-Christmas vet's bills later he was back to being a thick dog rather than a sick parrot.

Next item on the menu. We were laying in bed at midnight listening to the curious sounds coming from the vicarage roof. They turned out not to be the wind, or a squirrel, or a trapped carrier bag but somebody trying to remove the lead flashing from the roof, a mere yard or so from our no-longer sleeping heads.

The fiddler on the roof was followed days later by the appearance of a new tiny furry face in the kitchen, the sort of furry face that graces a creature with the name Jerry or Mickey or Minnie, the sort of furry face that means days of putting everything in plastic boxes, setting traps, blocking holes and finally calling in the council chemical warfare team.

A few days without anything untoward happening lured me into that false sense of security and so it seemed to be the right time to go looking for a new car. This is a worrying experience at the best of times, but after having been soothed by the dulcet tones of the salesman into mortgaging myself to Vauxhall for the next four years, I had, I thought, at least, got that over and done with. Until the phone call the

next day telling me that the car I thought I'd bought wasn't in fact the one I had, but a rather older and more knackered one. Did I want to pay an extra £2000 for the car I thought I'd been sold? It's called lowballing in the trade: it's not illegal but it's certainly immoral. Having finally sorted that, erm, 'misunderstanding' out, I returned home long after dark to find...

...water dripping on the kitchen floor. Clearly from a pipe. Which was inconveniently situated behind a built in kitchen cabinet. Towels down I determined to call the diocesan property people first thing in the morning, and try to wind down before going to bed. Alas, this was not to be. Within ten minutes came the sound of something slamming into the front window of the house. And again. And again. Scary as it was, this turned out to be a group of Hainault's younger residents doing their GCSE science homework, seeing if a soft thing- a snowball- could break a hard thing- my windows.

Keep a diary: then you too can relive a lousy month like that whenever you want.

Although stress does build up, my litany of New Year woes were mostly small matters: they pale in comparison to the sufferings of many in the world, indeed many in this church, this month. But when troubles turn into London buses and come *en masse* in rapid succession, it's sorely tempting to see a pattern in the mayhem and find oneself asking that perennial vexed question of the harassed: 'What have I done to deserve this?'

'What have I done to deserve this?' How many times have you heard that phrase? How many times have you said it yourself? It is such a commonplace thing to say, such a common feeling to have, that somehow unseen forces are conspiring to bring misfortune our way, so common is that feeling that it is rare to pause and think what an utterly bizarre thing it is we are saying. Yes, it is often said in a rhetorical way,

'What have I done to deserve this! Ho ho ho' but not always without a lingering suspicion that, perhaps, actually, someone up there has it in for us.

If you forget to put your handbrake on when you get out of the car and then stand watching it rolling backward down the hill, you are unlikely to cry 'What have I done to deserve this' because you know perfectly well what you did, or didn't do, to produce that particular effect. No, 'What have I done to deserve this?' is a different sort of question, and asking it implies some sort of supernatural intervention in our life, meting out our just desserts, not for inattention or forgetfulness but for our moral failings. At its most impersonal, some feel there may be some sort of this-life karmic cause and effect kicking in: at a more personal level, God is punishing us for misdemeanours past or present, in our actions or in our thoughts. It's a classic 'God of the gaps' thought: I can't explain why this is happening, it cannot be coincidence, so God must be behind it. At best, God may be testing us; at worst, punishing.

Illness and disability is a particularly fertile breeding ground for this sort of thinking: why do some people get ill and not others? Why does flu cause a mild illness in some and death in others? Why are some people born ill or with disabilities? Medical science can give us some answers, but 'random' is not an emotionally satisfying word: in so many cases the hand of morbidity seems to strike without regard to laws of science, and so the suspicion is never far from the emotional surface that an ill person is being punished for what they, or their parents, have done.

If we didn't know God any better, we might read the Gospels and think that Jesus knows what, say, the paralysed man let down through the rood has done to deserve his fate, and that is why, rather than healing his paralysis, he forgives his sins. This was definitely running round the heads of those sat listening to Jesus in the house with the new sunroof. Before Jesus heals the man blind from birth, his disciples ask him:

*"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

It's common enough in religious thinking, but if we let our thinking go down that road- illness as punishment for sin-we end up with an extraordinarily petty, vengeful, repulsive and definitely not Christian God. We cannot, logically, be selective; we cannot say, well God is obviously punishing this person, but cannot be punishing this other. We are not God and we cannot know his mind. Either all the bad things that might happen to a person are the finger of God, or nothing is. Christians imagine a God who gives himself, as the Son, for humanity; who goes to the lonely, squalid, agonising death of the cross for us; who goes to any extreme to bring back the lost sheep; that God cannot also spend his days punishing children by giving them malaria or flooding random coastlines because of equal marriage.

Not a sparrow falls to the ground with God knowing it, he's that involved: it doesn't, however mean that he distributes the fortunes and the misfortunes of this life according to our merit or lack thereof.

Time after time, over and over again Jesus warns us *not* to expect reward from God in this life. We are told that we must lose this life in order to win greater life, and in fact, if we are following God's script, the last thing this world will do is reward us. The reward of those who follow Jesus is persecution:

*They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles... you will be hated by all because of my name.*

[That nightmarish parable we heard today about the murderous vineyard tenants speaks of the fate of those who carry God's message.]

When the rich young man asks Jesus what he should do to earn eternal life, he is asked- by giving away his possessions- to lose his life in this world. And away he goes, unable to do it.

*Woe to you rich, for you have received your reward*

It's like one of those TV games shows where you can choose to gamble what you have already won on the hope of winning the star prize. The more you have already won, the less likely you are to chance it on the bigger prize.

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate ... even life itself, cannot be my disciple*

Strong stuff. Jesus is not saying that this world does not matter, that this world is illusory, put up with it now because it doesn't really matter and there's jam tomorrow. Far from it. In fact, strange though it may seem, that imperishable treasure in heaven is built up not with heavenly things, but with earthly things. Back to that rich young man:

*Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*

God's cause and effect may not operate on earth in the simplistic way our emotions tell us. Vet's bills, lead thieves, mouse infestations, lowballing used car salesmen and leaking taps are not punishment for my moral failings: if they are I've been getting off pretty lightly. No matter how many masses I go to or prayers I say, I still won't ever win the lottery or even find a parking space outside Church on a Sunday in summer. But it is very much the case that actions have consequences: the pebbles we cast into the waters of our lives, and each rock we throw, do make ripples in heaven.