

Winners and Losers

(or 'Are you addicted to religion?')

by

Lee H Smith



**(one of the more bizarre works
from the pen of a christian)**

ABRIDGED VERSION

INTRODUCTION

Again I saw that, under the sun,
the race is not to the swift,
nor the battle to the strong,
nor bread to the wise,
nor riches to the intelligent,
nor favour to the men of skill;
but time and chance happen to them all.
Ecclesiastes 9:11

When we first decided to go to a race meeting in 2008, it was because we felt it would be nice to have a day out away from the pressures and problems at home.

It had been two years since we'd been to our last one - at Hexham in October 2006 - and we opted at very short notice for a Sunday meeting that was subsequently abandoned early in the morning due to water logging, the Winners' Enclosure (so they said) was under inches of water.

So, we looked at the local meetings and opted for one on a 'work day' when there would be fewer people about, booked annual leave and made preparations accordingly.

It had been our intention to have one - just the one - day out and to enjoy it the best we could but, having come back with significantly more money than we had gone with (a surprise to the both of us as we had simply gone to have a pleasant day out), we decided to go to another meeting a few weeks later.

Returning from *that* meeting with the *same* amount in our pockets that we went with, we took the decision to 'strike while the iron was hot' and travel south for a further meeting in two days' time, a racecourse that we'd pencilled in to visit if the one on the Tuesday had been abandoned as it had threatened to be.

It was here we watched one of the 'Class' races of the season and were so excited at being able to witness these magnificent animals up close and extremely personal.

That time we actually paid for the day (that is, what we would normally expect to pay for a day out at the races - one hundred and fifty pounds that covers two meals, entrance fees, race cards, petrol and so on) - although we still hadn't been out of pocket for all three meetings and had a little left to put towards a fourth meeting in the New Year.

Throughout those first three meetings, 'things' happened - strange things, things that it made sense to commit to stories and articles. Some were stories of races, others were articles that came about as a result of watching other races at different locations on the television or on following up the runners that had been expected to run at the meetings we'd gone to.

It was, perhaps, one of the more bizarre periods that we've been through in our married life but it was one, nevertheless, that proved to be both fruitful and insightful - and, sometimes, just downright bizarre and wacky (please note that what happened at Huntingdon was *not* made up).

We trust that you will enjoy it through this series of articles as much as we did by 'being there'.



INTRODUCTION TO THE ABRIDGED VERSION

After having had the 'full version' of 'Winners and Losers' on the Web for over six months (although the work gradually evolved over the course of around a year to be book length), I took the decision to abridge the work as I felt that one or two articles weren't necessary to be included along with some articles that needed to be reduced in length.

I was never fully happy with the full version of 'Cheltenham 2010' and have taken the opportunity to use the editing scissors liberally on that piece, as well as removing the 'Testimony' which, although I am still happy with, seems to cause the flow of the articles to become disjointed.

Anyone who wishes to have the 'full version' can email me at the address given on our contact page (www.arlev.co.uk/contact.htm) and I'll be happy to send them a pdf file of the complete work (which could well be added to in the future).

For those interested, the abridged version has reduced the word count from around 78,000 to 54,000.

Lee H Smith
November 2010



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MARKET RASEN

Thursday 20 November 2008

INTRODUCTION

Race meetings are strange creatures - mention the concept to people and you'll get different reactions.

To some, it's simply a place to gamble - probably to most people - and to have a few drinks, a meal and some fresh air. It's most certainly a day out that breaks from the norm but it's also an echo back to a former time - that is, if you go to a meeting that has its roots back over a couple of hundred years ago.

To the trainers, it's the conclusion of a series of preparations they've made over the previous weeks and months to get their horses ready for the event and, to the owners, they have the opportunity to see their own horse take on challengers and, if somehow they get their noses in front at the line, some prize money to offset against the training fees - although, from what I hear from the owners when they speak, it's more about having a horse who's won and being able to be joyful in the event.

For the jockeys, it's both their livelihood and enjoyment. Filled with more danger than the average person's daily grind, they throw caution to the wind and take on the going and obstacles to bring their horses home in the best position they can.

For me, the meeting sits as a conclusion to a week of events and contemplations - which is why, when bad weather causes an early morning inspection, I always grimace in case the thoughts of the week won't find a fulfilment in the races of the day.

Yes, it starts about a week previous...

Probably even before a week prior to the meeting, a venue has to be chosen. It's best to make plans well in advance because the five day declaration stage marks the commencement of the race meeting as far as I'm concerned.

So, for Market Rasen's meeting on Thursday 20 November 2008, the preparation began the previous Friday evening when the trainers listed their horses as being entries for one of the races the following week.

There will be an overnight declaration stage for the meeting on Wednesday lunchtime but most of the work for the enjoyment of the races is done in those days leading up to it - in fact, Wednesday evening would only see a few cursory glances at the card for a re-evaluation of a couple of animals, perhaps, but, generally speaking, by the time the eve comes, there's little to do except try to grab some sleep - and that's not an easy thing to do considering we're as excited as kids waiting for Christmas Day to arrive.

Each horse is looked at and the recent runs glanced at - what going does the horse run best on (firm, good or soft)? Does the horse run better with one jockey on board rather than another? Does it show its best form at the track its going to be running at or elsewhere? Does it seem to prefer an undulating or flat track? One with tight bends or long sweeping curves? What distance is it best at and is that the race distance at the meeting? Is the race being used as a preparation for a bigger race or is this the event that the animal has been aimed at for the season?

Does the horse have blinkers, a visor, cheek pieces or a tongue-tie for the first time? In other words, do the stable think the horse has been hindered by not having its mind on the race and are taking steps to put that right?

Is the horse running against lower class horses this time and so should do better than it has done - or is it going up in class and may not run as well?

These types of questions - and many more besides - are pondered.

But there's the trainer to consider, too. For example, why bring one horse three and a half hundred miles for a race if he doesn't really think it has a chance to run well? Or perhaps he's doing it because the owner lives close by and wants to see his horse compete?

Additionally, it's fairly significant to note when the same horse is engaged two, three or even four times within the space of a few days in different races - where does the trainer and owner actually think that it has the best chance? Possibly at the meeting where they take it and declare it as an overnight runner.

And how many rides does the jockey have at this meeting? That is, has he come down for the single ride or has he come down with an idea of riding three or four horses? Only at the five day stage do the names of definite riders stand out for, generally, jockeys are acquired two or three days before the race if there have been no fixed plans before.

There's the weather, too - it's not just a matter of some concern whether the elements might conspire against the meeting and it be off due to frost, fog or rain, but a five day period of precipitation may turn a track

from having firm going into soft - or sun may do the opposite.

In short, both individually and collectively, the race needs assessing and that's both enjoyable and fun for, when the time of the race rolls round, you've already some idea of how you think the race will pan out and, subsequently, will be able to see where you were both right and wrong.

But it also leaves you time to enjoy the day, to wander round the paddock and watch the horses parade, to watch the bookies cut odds or push prices out (and wonder how so much money can be going on the horse with three legs that can only run backwards), to see the jockeys talk with the trainers and owners, to visit the winners enclosure to smile with the winners and to watch the losers unsaddle disconsolately 'round the back', out of sight.

So, a National Hunt race meeting is much more than three hours on one afternoon in the freezing cold - it's almost a week's worth of entertainment both on and off the track, the race itself being but the conclusion to a process that's begun life many days previous.

And that - believe it or not - is how these stories were composed.

They began life as a consideration of a future event that was outworked on the day through a series of both planned and chance happenings with ourselves being the witnesses.

To some, all that happened was a field of horses rushed past them on their way to a finishing post somewhere located on an oval track.

But, to us, there were some significant stories that became discernible behind the unfolding events of each of the days when, very often, the victor was neither the favourite nor even the best horse in the race - and when a story was being told that, if you had ears to hear, was quite easily discernible.

THE THREE FORTY

Upright Ima is not a world beater.

She's never going to win a Grand National, a Champion Hurdle or a Gold Cup and, if truth be told, she would probably best be matched to her ability if she were owned by a rich lady of some Manor or other who enjoys nothing more than cantering out with a beloved animal round the wooded grounds that surround her country mansion.

But Upright Ima is a race horse - and a poor one at that.

In her thirty-eight previous starts for her trainer, she's finished ahead just the once and that was so long ago that you'd need several calendars to count back to the occasion rather than a time piece.

But, although she's slow, one-paced and doesn't earn her keep from prize money won, she has one redeeming feature that you can't deny - she's genuine...

...and loved. Loved by her owner who, even though she could well have passed her on by now, has kept her in training and part of her yard.

If you put a professional jockey on board her, with all his guile and horsemanship, you can be assured that he will get out of her no more - and no less - than the most unskilful amateur rider could.

Ask her to quicken and she will - if she can - but the problem usually is that, in the races in which she often finds herself, she can't.

So, there was this race, you see - all amateur riders.

All *lady* amateur riders at that - jockeys who ride maybe half a dozen times a year under Rules for the pleasure of having a runner in a National Hunt meeting and whose love is in the sport, in the taking part.

This particular day, Upright Ima had a young rider who'd ridden in just four races prior and hadn't yet even been placed in the first three - not even once. It didn't seem that the partnership had a lot going for it - especially when you considered the field that made up Ima's competition.

Although they were certainly not the most elite bunch of equines ever gathered together under the sun (for, in their most recent past sixty-six races, they had secured between them just the single win), they were certainly generally better than Ima - with closer finishes to the winner - and were all the more likely to be snapped up by another owner to be added to their own string of racehorses.

But they were all better horses *with a professional sat aboard them* - they it were who could craft a semi-acceptable run from them, were able to squeeze a performance from them that had the trainer thinking that they'd turned the corner and that, next time they ran, they could get their heads in front, although they hardly ever did.

Ima, however, ran equally well - or equally badly depending on how you wished to look at it - with either professional or amateur. It made no difference to Ima whether the jockey tried to cajole a faster pace from her or not - if it wasn't inside her, no one could bring it out.

But, as I said at the beginning, the one redeeming feature was that Ima was genuine.

It must be said that most jockeys fancy their chances when they're in a race - even when they're on the most unlikely of horses running against the champions of their sport, they always hold the hope that, somehow, they can turn the tables and come through triumphant.

So, it's not without foundation that, when the jockey jumped on board, she thought that she had a chance. But what *sort* of chance is another matter - I doubt if she believed that she could really win.

The instructions were plain and precise - hold the horse up at the back until the final bend, then try to make headway to challenge in the home straight and take it up over the last if the horse had got anything left.

Nice and easy, concise and simple.

With ten fences in front of them, the jockey tucked Ima in at the back, the other horses cantering ahead, making the running, jumping hurdles adequately enough. Uneventful though the race panned out, the field were all left with a chance with just over half a mile to go.

Coming to four flights from home and heading down the back straight for the final time, Ima was plum last. Even though all was going according to plan in the jockey's mind, the horse began to wonder just what the rider was playing at as, by this time, surely they should be running in front of the field or, at least, be level with one or two of them?

But, no - two lengths behind the field, they approached three from home, the jockey watching as one of the favourites back-peddled rapidly to join her in last place.

Over three out and still nothing.

The race was hotting up at the front now, with riders going for their whips, shaking the reins and generally trying to urge their horses on for one final run as they approached the final turn into the straight.

Just as they turned at the far end, Ima was told 'Go!' - and she needed no second encouragement.

From the stand, onlookers saw the horse disappear round the outside of the field as they turned for home and, within half a furlong, instead of coming to challenge the leaders, she ran clean past them into a three length lead as they approached two out.

The race commentator had been variously noting Ima's run with depressing concluding phrases such as '...back markers include Upright Ima'

at the start of the second circuit,

'Upright Ima's last'

when they came to four hurdles from home and that she was

'...in rear'

at the top of the course as they began descending round the final bend.

But, hidden from view, he surprisingly announced to the crowds that

'...with a big move round the outside, Upright Ima's made rapid progress from the rear of the field'

and, almost immediately, that the horse and rider had gone into the lead

'...by two lengths...'

as they approached two out and the jockey noticed - perhaps for the first time - that she wasn't too worried about any horses in front of her.

There *were* none.

But, by now, the jockey was panicking.

This was too early - they weren't meant to be leading this far from home. But she couldn't pull the horse back as there were now jockeys realising that a brown bolt of lightning had just dashed past them and they set off trying to catch her.

Over two out and the jockey took the only decision possible - to hell with the race plan, this was a totally unexpected and unintentional situation, she had to drive for home.

With a fast-finishing horse starting to claw back the lead, the jockey asked Ima for one final effort over the last hurdle, didn't look back when the challenger came within a length and pushed the horse out for all her worth.

Just in time, the finishing post raced past them.

Ima had won.

As the horse and rider walked back into the unsaddling enclosure, I couldn't help but notice the broad smile on the jockey's face.

The professional jockeys had come in previously to a round of applause, touching their whip to their cap in

acknowledgement of the win - yet barely a smile would break out on their faces because, for them, this was 'business as usual', paid employment and something they were expected to achieve.

But for the young Lady jockey, all the arguments about showing a stiff upper lip in the face of victory were out the window - she'd won an unexpected and unlikely victory for the first time in her life and she couldn't hide her joy.

Yet this was no Grand National, neither Gold Cup - it was a small, insignificant Ladies' Only Hurdle race on a small, low grade National Hunt course in Lincolnshire, one nippy afternoon in November.

But the genuineness of one animal had overcome horses who were demonstrably better than herself - the caniness of the trainer and owner had made the victory possible - and the obedience of the jockey to the riding instructions (as far as she had been able to obey them) had secured it.

In some, albeit small, way I had seen a glimpse of where true Victory lies for the believer - in genuineness and obedience, following the Master's instructions and, when finding yourself in a position that's totally unexpected, using your nous and giving everything you've got inside you to bring home what's been entrusted.



SIGNS AND BLUNDERS

Wednesday 17 December 2008

Punters look for signs.

They can't help it but, with their strike rate being so low, they need some justification for the money that they keep pouring on horses and greyhounds.

Men may laugh loudly when their dear wives and girlfriends pick out the horses by recourse to a cute name, the colour of the animal or, perhaps more likely, that they have an 'Uncle Fred' on their father's side of the family that seems to be calling them to part with some of their money - the fact that the horse is known as Colin in the stable is neither here nor there and, to some, it would be an even bigger confirmation as there's also one such relative called that (or else it was Uncle Fred's middle name).

But the more 'wary' and 'wise' punter also looks for a sign - although, in their case, it's considered to be riding on the back, very often, of statistics.

So, if no favourites have won the race in the past five years, the indication is that it can be safely opposed this year too - that it's unlikely that it has any real chance because it sits in the continuing line of probability. To others, the same evidence may prompt them to say that it's about time a favourite *did* win, that the likelihood of one going in is overdue and increasingly likely with each passing year.

And both punters - the one who opposes the favourite and the one who sides with it - both put their bets on with confidence and the reassurance that they've made the right choice.

It doesn't matter whether the horse wins or loses, however. The important aspect of the bet is the justification for putting it on.

The opportunity for the punter to receive a 'sign' is almost without limit and I give the above examples only to show how the mind can work and the will be led through a series of coincidences that are chance occurrences.

But there was a race at Bangor, the two twenty to be precise.

And there was a horse running in it called Dan Buoy, one that had been withdrawn while we had been at Market Rasen back in November for a reason that now escapes me.

Perhaps it had been lame - they often are.

The horse had run a half-decent race just before the scheduled run and looked as if it was sure to go off a short-priced favourite, but it was redirected to a race in Newbury where it had finished third behind a horse that had followed home a very good up-and-coming hurdler that had won at Cheltenham.

Dan Buoy's subsequent run at Bangor this day looked fairly intriguing and the form made me think that it may go off a warm favourite as punters may go with the opinion of a fair few of the tipsters who had been selecting it in the morning papers.

So, I resolved to watch the race when I got home.

However, before the race was even off, one of my work colleagues mentioned to me that they had just received a piece of work from Bangor office and, as we were located in Sheffield, she was going to send it back to them.

Immediately, the coincidence woke me up. Dan Buoy was soon to run at Bangor, the wrongly directed piece of work had been intended for Bangor.

Could this be a sign?!

But something else was to transpire that confirmed 'in the mouth of two or three witnesses' that this must, indeed, have been a direct sign from the gods of gambling.

When I got home - and having made sure I hadn't found out how the horse had done so I could watch the race 'not knowing the result' - my wife and I sat down to watch an edition of 'Flog It' with the evening meal.

This is a more common occurrence than it might sound as we normally record one episode per weekday for this very purpose - I should also point out that we get fairly annoyed when they replace the programme with live snooker or golf as it doesn't seem to go with any meal whatsoever.

But, anyway, we were watching the programme when I realised that the show was coming from Bangor.

Yes, Bangor!

It seemed clear that 'contact' was ultimately being made, that for some reason that I couldn't fathom, the result was so certain that I hardly needed to watch the race. Still, Kath didn't know any of this and she wanted to see it so we went up to the computer afterwards and summoned up the race.

Amazingly, the Starting Price of the horse was seven-to-one - and, seven being the perfect number, it seemed, again, as if confirmation was being given that the coincidences were nothing of the sort.

I won't go in to the details of the race as they're not particularly important - suffice to say that the horse -

just like its starting price - finished in the perfect position.
That is, seventh.

For the punter, these strange coincidences are either accepted or rejected. If they're rejected and the horse wins, they curse their stupidity at not reading the signs and believing the omens that indicated which horse would win.

If they accept them and the horse loses, then at least they followed their heart and they certainly are assured that they couldn't 'take the chance' in case it *had* won and them not be on it.

In fact, the idea of coincidences and omens is self-perpetuating for 'punters seek signs' and, without them, they may not be urged on to place more and more money on less and less talented animals.

But, if we were to confine the requirement for signs to the realm of the 'worldly' and irreligious we would be making a catastrophic mistake for, in the realm of the Church, the same fundamental requirement for a sign is alive and well.

Of course, in the case of a believer, the last thing they would do is to look for something to confirm to them which horse is to win the Grand National or which dog the Greyhound Derby - but we do delight in throwing caution to the wind in order to justify courses of action and even belief systems that pull away from the clear and sound instructions and leadings of the Holy Spirit.

And, being spiritualised, it seems to me that it's an addiction that's even harder to break than the punters'.

For, realising that 'all things are from God' and that 'nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving', it must follow that, for a believer who is striving to follow after God Himself, all things must be under His control and, further, that all things are ordained by Him.

For all believers can be assured that 'in everything God works for good with those who love Him' so a coincidence is surely a misnomer - it should rather be called a God-incident and God's hand should be seen clearly in any circumstances that come to a believer to push Him either one way or the other.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that 'time and chance happen to [all men]' and although God may work in all situations to bring about the purpose of His will, it doesn't follow that all things are a direct result of God's intervention - or that He's trying to convey some instruction by each and every incident that happens throughout the day.

I wouldn't choose to equate a punter's faith with that of a believer in Christ but from my own experience as having sat on both sides of the partition that separates them, I can't help but see the similarity of thought process that exists in both.

For, if any of us allow coincidences to rule and dictate our course of action, we become no more than 'victims of circumstance' in, perhaps, a more frightening way than the phrase was originally intended to be used.



SEDGEFIELD

Tuesday 9 December 2008

INTRODUCTION

Sedgefield is a beautiful track and no excuse is offered neither apology given that, for a few short stretches of the course, the horses disappear from sight behind a small copse or round the back of a small hillock.

Such is the nature of National Hunt racing that it's what you would expect from the more traditional of racecourses where the word 'flat' can never be used of any of the course except, perhaps, for the state of the beer in the bar.

The grandstands face north, too - a clear case of an ancient circuit not bowing down to the demands for comfort from the modern race goer for you can stay there nearly all day and never see the sun - indeed, the paddock and area for spectators is normally shrouded in shadow and frost and one has to be extremely careful where one puts the feet or they, too, will be sent in a northerly direction while the rest of you heads south.

Even if the racecourse passes an early morning inspection and is affirmed as being safe for the horses and riders, it surely begs the question as to whether the same sort of requirement should be laid on the viewing and betting areas or whether, perhaps, ice skates should be provided as part of the entrance fee.

It isn't my most favourite track (but it ranks way up there in my top five). For that you'd have to travel west and slightly further north to Hexham, a track set on two sides of a valley with hedges for fence wings, where a bracing westerly gale normally howls across the track even in Summer.

But it was Sedgefield we were at and there was a Seller on the card - and that is always fun.

You see, you won't find Selling races at the top meetings for the entire object of this type of race - the *raison d'être* - is to attract a bidder on your horse so you can get shot of it and, with the money saved on the training fees, go on to buy a better and classier animal.

Some person is bound to think they can do *more* with the animal than you've been able to do with it to date and, with a change of trainer or jockey, that it can excel in races where your expertise has been found wanting.

Sellers, then, are for the lowlier of animals for, even if the horse doesn't get his nose in front, a would-be owner can offer five thousand pounds and claim it - an offer that can't be refused under the rules.

But the winner is always auctioned off, not claimed.

It was Barashi who'd won the seller, a bay gelding who'd shown little form of any real note but who hacked up well enough on the day.

And there we were, gathered round the winners enclosure, waiting for the bidding to begin.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' the announcer and auctioneer began, 'we will shortly begin the sale of this fine young racehorse, the winner of our third race here today. The bidding will start at two thousand nine hundred - and may I please remind you that all bids will be in guineas.'

The crowd began to hush in expectation. I imagined that the rows of people now gathered about the enclosure all had one hand on their cheque book, readily anticipating the acquisition of the winning horse.

'So,' the auctioneer continued, 'we come to the sale of Barashi, a three year old gelding by King's Best out of Maid to Dance. Although the horse has run moderately this summer on the flat, it has shown little snippets of form over hurdles prior to the event today and has won in convincing style by six lengths from the consistent Rivington Pike.'

The auctioneer was eyeing the crowd eagerly, wanting to see the first raised hand.

'Who will bid me two thousand nine hundred guineas?'

The crowd stood silently, waiting for a bid. Perhaps they were just punters?

'Who will be the first bidder for this fine young animal? Only a three year old and he's surely shown a fair amount of promise here today by taking the race from the hot favourite.'

This obviously wasn't working - the bidders needed some encouragement.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, where else are you going to be able to get a Howard Johnson trained horse for only three thousand pounds?'

Surely, if you had the money to pay the trainers' fees, you could get your *donkey* to be trained by Howard Johnson? Wasn't the trainer immaterial to the future ability and potential of the horse? If you wanted, you could change the trainer as quickly as you could a pair of underpants - but you'd be stuck with the horse no matter what.

Incidentally - and I really don't know why this occurred to me at this point of the proceedings - I remembered seeing an advert in the Market Rasen race card the previous month for Weatherbys Horse Insurance, with a colour picture of a donkey at the top of the page and with the immortal words 'Have you got your Ass covered?' in large typeface below.

But my mind quickly returned to the matter at hand.

The auctioneer appeared to me to be flogging a dead horse (although I can fully testify that Barashi was most definitely still breathing and moving to disprove my thesis) and he tried once more to get the opening bid.

'Are there any bids on this promising three year old? He surely won't be long in winning another race. Just think of the thrill of owning this magnificent creature...'

I had to pinch myself - was this horse taking on the proportions and reputation of a Nijinsky or Brigadier Gerard? For goodness' sake, this was just a Seller!

'...a horse that I'm sure will go on to have a very successful hurdling career.'

So, I asked myself, why would it be entered in a Seller if the owner shared your enthusiasm? Surely the reason for the equine's entry in this type of race is because the owner *doesn't* think he will go on to be successful.

'Are there any bids?'

I looked round the paddock - as nearly everyone else was - then noticed Kath removing her hand from her pocket. I grabbed it quickly and gave it a squeeze - just in case. You can never be too careful - impulsively buying a few necklaces or broaches is fine by me but I do draw the line at racehorses.

'Okay, Mr Wylie,' the auctioneer concluded, speaking to the owner, 'it looks like you'll be taking her home with you.'

The auction was over.

THE TWO FIFTY

Kath had been undecided about which horse to opt for - and she could only have the single horse in the race. When it came to a straight choice between Flaming Heck and the much shorter priced Herbie, she went for the horse with the longer odds and waited for the off of the race.

But those nagging doubts were starting to weigh heavily on her mind.

Had she done right to choose the less fancied runner? Wasn't Herbie's price more reflective of his chance and his likelihood of winning than Flaming Heck's?

As the runners lined up for the start of the Chase, she concluded that she'd rather be on Herbie but, having now a ticket for the outsider, she couldn't change.

In the end, she watched them stream over the first fence, cheering Herbie to lose rather than hoping Flaming Heck could win.

Down the back straight for the first time and she barely noticed that her selection was in the lead, disputing the race with another fancied runner - her eyes were strictly on Herbie's jockey's colours and the commentary was being listened to solely to hear how it was doing.

As they streamed over the third and approached the fourth, the announcer called Flaming Heck as the joint leader and, with a raising of volume as they tackled the next, noticed that Herbie had made a bad mistake and unseated his rider on to the deck.

All of a sudden, the crowd in the Grandstand sighed with disappointment as they saw their money disappear forever into the bookies' pockets.

However, one lone, female onlooker punched the sky with her fist and shouted 'Yes!' while I tried to distance myself from her, shuffling quickly to one side and trying to make my facial expression appear to be as disappointed as the crowd about me.

Flaming Heck eventually finished tenth - the last of those who finished. But Kath was as delighted and relieved as if she'd been on a long-priced winner.

Sometimes, it doesn't matter *who* wins in the Body of runners - but it *can* be vitally important that a specific *someone* doesn't.

THE THREE TWENTY

Some horses have their heart set as leaders of the herd - you'll find them at the front of the mass of stallions, fillies and mares, vying for position as they gallop over the countryside in wild groups.

It's the instinct that causes them to lead, to get their head in front to see nothing ahead except fresh pastures and to feel nothing on their faces except the rush of the wind as they cut through it.

Others are a little more reserved.

They like to run with the herd, shielded from the on looking predators by myriads of hooves on their right and left, both buffeted and buffeting as they speed onwards, following the leaders in front.

Still others don't see what all the fuss is about.

They'll hang around at the back and wait until the others have tried the way for them, tested the ground and made sure the path is safe to tread - if the lead horse hits a pothole or runs over a cliff, there's more chance of taking remedial action if you're hanging around at the back.

And that's what Nevsky Bridge is like.

Having only got her head in front once in her last twenty-five previous outings over fences - and that, although the trainer doesn't know it, was because she was frightened by an ominous looking cloud that caused her to bolt clear of the field to get away from it - she could never be your idea of a winner, no matter how low a class of race you dropped her in to.

She would still be content to gallop at the back, enjoying the run as she travelled round the course. At Sedgefield, however, events transpired against her nature...

It was obvious that Nevsky's jockey wanted her to start the race at the back - he was slow to line up, didn't urge her to walk alongside the main field as they came under orders and certainly showed no concern that she started running some ten lengths behind the front runner, Blast The Past.

To Nevsky Bridge, this was another pleasant - if cold - race meeting, and she knew how this went (as it had done on twenty-four previous occasions).

It all began in the morning with grooming and feed, followed closely by the handlers removing her from the stable and walking her in to a small horsebox that transported her to the course.

That was the time when she always got excited for, although she enjoyed cantering for exercise most days, to meet different horses, to see crowds of onlookers and to experience being the focal point of many people's attention was something that was always pleasant.

But she was always content to follow, not to lead - to experience an event rather than to be the cause of making one happen - and certainly, absolutely certainly, to run with the herd in case the leader fell over a cliff in front and evasive action needed to be taken.

As they approached the winning post to mark the beginning of their final circuit, Nevsky Bridge was stone last - but for the horse *and* the jockey, the race was going according to plan, even though many in the stands thought that it was about time the horse took closer order and challenged for the lead.

The jockey knew different, though, and, being the guiding influence, was quite sure that, even though he still had ten lengths to make up, the horse was fully capable of doing it - drawing alongside the leader wasn't the problem, passing the damn thing was where the conundrum lay.

If ever a jockey needed help, this was the race - and it was soon to transpire as the horse next to last began to struggle with the increase in pace of the leader.

Realising that it was starting to struggle and that, if it slowed to a standstill, his charge would probably do the same, he gave her a light slap, asked her to quicken past and was relieved when she responded.

For Nevsky Bridge, the order was a no-brainer.

She saw two horses ahead and, although she wouldn't in normal circumstances want to get her head in front of another equine, she realised very quickly that she was simply moving on into a new position of following something else.

In actual fact, with two horses hidden from view by the weakening horse, she'd actually passed three and moved in to fourth.

It was over three fences from home that the jockey was presented with what appeared at first glance to be an insurmountable problem.

Blast The Past quickened clear of both Royal Flynn and Toss The Caber, leaving a long gap that he knew immediately would be too much to persuade Nevsky Bridge to recover - not that the horse wasn't capable of such a turn of speed but, to her, passing the two horses in front would have made her feel like she was leading the pack and that, as I've previously said, was something that she never felt comfortable to do.

So, instead of doing anything, he sat behind the second and third and waited - waited for something to happen that he wasn't expecting but which he knew he needed if he was ever going to bring the horse home in front.

And, amazingly, it happened.

As they approached the highest point of the track, Blast The Past slowed down to catch her breath, allowing the two horses chasing her to close rapidly and get within a length.

From the stands, it looked like they'd put a spurt on but, in actual fact, the leader - having led for the entire race - was starting to grow leg weary and there wasn't too much left in the tank to get up the home straight to the

finishing line.

Without a second thought, Nevsky Bridge was pushed up alongside Royal Flynn to dispute second but directly behind the leader.

Nevsky Bridge was enjoying herself - and she was still following the lead. She hadn't been counting the horses as she'd been overtaking them and all she was aware of was that she was still at the back of the herd - that the herd had now reduced to the sum total of three was neither here nor there, the fact that the remaining horses were lost in the distance behind her didn't make it feel like they weren't in the same race.

Knowing that the last fence was approaching quickly and that the moment of truth was fast approaching, the jockey gave Nevsky a wake up call and was shocked to find absolutely nothing.

Again he asked her to quicken - nothing.

To the horse, the only question that crossed her mind at that moment was 'What's the point in quickening?'

It was pleasant there behind the leader and there couldn't be much longer to go before she'd be taken back to the stables - and home.

The jockey, seeing the fence loom large, pulled the filly from behind Blast The Past and, for the first time in the race, showed the horse daylight, asking her to quicken past the now weakening leader to go on and win the race.

Whoa!

Nothing!

From there being a backside the size of Jupiter in front of her, it suddenly turned all green, the shock causing her to fumble at the last hurdle for her footing, making a hash of it but managing to stay on her feet.

This wasn't the plan!

To be in the lead? No way!

As the two leaders jumped the last, Blast the Past hurtled into Nevsky Bridge. Nevsky, feeling the presence of a horse on its right flank, felt much more comfortable and pushed back - twice.

Trying to straighten the beast under him, the jockey pulled his whip through into his left hand and urged the filly on for one final rally - but nothing came.

Nevsky Bridge was happy where she was - running, as she perceived it, in the midst of the pack with a horse covering her closely from predatory attack and certainly not willing to remove herself from the protection.

It was then that the nature of the racecourse came to the horse's rescue.

Sedgefield has been the scene of horse racing since 1732 and, in those days, courses were built wherever there was vacant land that the farmer didn't mind being used for the meet or had no idea was being used until after they got home from work in the fields.

The undulations that the modern racecourse has inherited make the track ideal as a test of stamina, determining whether the horse and rider can cope with freewheeling down and climbing up over small hills, sharply turning round tight bends and running on ground that alternates between heavy and good.

All in all, Sedgefield is more about jockeyship and a test of a horse's character than flatter tracks are - but the run in, well...

Picture the scene - you've been struggling round the circuit (I'm talking to horses now and *not* jockeys), dealing adequately enough with all the obstacles put in your way and are just starting to get leg weary when you're met with a climb up to the winning post that more resembles the north face of the Eiger than it does a pleasant Sunday afternoon canter.

And that's where grim determination will either win or lose you the race for, you may have free-wheeled successfully downhill from the second last to the final hurdle but, when you start to run uphill that last fifty yards, the muscles start screaming at you that they weren't designed for such a test.

Blast The Past, who'd started to run on empty round the final bend and had been caught in the lead, kicked on with the aid of a descending hill, but started drifting across the track when she met the gentle incline over the final flight.

When it came to the last few yards, the hill proved altogether too much and, to onlookers in the stand, Nevsky Bridge appeared to spring past her to take a length advantage as horse and jockey crossed the winning

line.

In fact, Nevsky hadn't altered her speed one bit and, when she realised that the presence of Blast The Past was no more, she slowed down to allow her to catch up, pass her and give her something to follow.

By that time, though, the race was over.



FANCY THAT

Friday 19 December 2008

When the Five Day Declarations came out for Sedgefield, I eagerly pored over the entries and read up on the horses that, potentially, could be running.

Amongst others, there was one called Door Boy, a novice hurdler engaged in a race that was so far below his class that it made me think that not only would he be long odds on but that he would probably only have to turn up to collect the prize.

To say that his previous outing at Cheltenham had been encouraging would be like saying that the Titanic would've looked good on the Serpentine - it was an understatement of such epic proportions that the earth would surely quake at the injustice of it.

Digging a little below the surface, I soon discovered that the horse had also been declared at the Five Day stage at Musselburgh on the Monday, the day before Sedgefield, so the horse's participation was somewhat in doubt.

However, come Sunday afternoon, it was clear that the trainer had withdrawn it in preference, it appeared to be, to Sedgefield - and Hexham. For there in the declarations at Hexham on the Wednesday was also Door Boy.

Monday afternoon came and the horse disappeared from the runners at Sedgefield - followed by its disappearance from the card at Hexham the following day.

However, it then appeared in the card at both Cheltenham and Doncaster on the Friday - and disappeared again on the Thursday afternoon only to reappear on the Five Day Declarations for Catterick for Tuesday.

And, yet again, come the overnight declarations on the Monday, Door Boy was again withdrawn and re-entered in a race at Ascot on the Friday.

Only, this time, it was declared as an overnight entry.

The trainer was actually going to run it at last.

It must be difficult to be sure of the right race to run your horse in for a balance has to be achieved where it can be developed and improved, where the true competency of the equine can be genuinely assessed but where also there's a good chance of prize money to pay for the upkeep.

At Catterick, Hexham and Sedgefield, although the winner would only have received around three thousand pounds, a victory looked beyond doubt - at Cheltenham and Doncaster, however, you would've had to have expected your horse to have finished in the first two to secure the same amount.

At Ascot on the Friday - the race in which it eventually took its chance - the prize money was such that a win at one of the small meetings could've perhaps been equated with a third.

But this was a long journey for the stable to undertake from Durham in the north of England to Ascot that lay in the south - a journey that would have to incorporate a fair chunk of the busy and frustrating M25.

Could this be an indication that the trainer actually fancied his chances to *win* the race? That the six previous declarations were 'fail safes' in case the owner wanted a quick return but that, ultimately, the race that was lined up - one of the best Novice Hurdle races to date this season - would bring the horse on and show to a captive audience that it was now a serious contender for a win at the season's Cheltenham Festival in March?

Having had a look through the form of the race myself - and seeing that Door Boy had as good a chance as any - I asked Kath to have a look through the runners the night before.

'Mmm. Golan Way,' Kath thumbed her way down the small field until one caught her eye. 'Four runs, four wins. Probably be favourite.'

She clicked on the hyperlink and called up the form.

'Three wins in lower grade company before a Class 1 win at Cheltenham - ran on from two out and drew clear. Well, that's significant. Must have a great chance, I can see that winning.'

Her eye next caught Wendel with two ones beside it's name.

'Lower class company,' she began, 'but so was Golan Way until it's last race. Won very easily as you'd expect it to if it was a better class horse. Yes, I like it - that'll go close.'

She took a sip from her tea and a small chunk of some chocolate covered toffee before resuming her consideration of the form. Medermit caught her eye - probably because it had her favourite jockey on board, Robert 'Chocolate' Thornton (was this some coincidence or what?), a jockey with, as she keeps telling me, a face that only a mother could love.

'Medermit,' she whispered, 'drew away on it's last race over two miles. Well, it's done the distance, it looks a better class than it's been running in. That's got to have a good chance.'

It was fairly obvious to her that the race was becoming rather open in her own mind. She noticed that two horses had run in the same race and tried to compare the form.

'Dee Ee Williams,' she pressed her thumb on the form line and read out, 'beat Bergo by three-quarters of a length - now Bergo is seven pounds better off. Seven pounds?' she asked herself.

'Seven pounds for less than a length beating? It should reverse the form with a lighter weight, surely? Oh - and they make Dee Ee more fancied to win the race than Bergo. That can't be right, surely?'

She checked the Betting Forecast on two other websites and saw the same - for some reason only known to the Betting fraternity, Bergo wasn't fancied to reverse the form.

Then her eye caught a small note about Dee Ee Williams that read '...is an improving type and will have come on vastly for his last win.' That seemed to indicate that Bergo *might not* get the better of him.

'Dead heat first,' she mumbled, 'or definitely should be very close to the finish seeing as their battle was at the same track as today.' She paused a moment before announcing to no one else but the air in the room, 'Goodness! All these seem to have an outstanding chance to win. Now, what was that one Lee said? Ah yes...'

She let her eyes run down the form.

'A second in Ireland before being bought for almost two hundred thousand pounds and brought over to England. Won easily at Kelso before a decent second at Cheltenham.' Now where had she just seen some form at that track? 'Cheltenham,' she repeated to herself, 'Cheltenham?'

She summoned the Golan Way race and compared the two runs. It was the same going, just two days apart, Door Boy running over five more furlongs but, when she compared the 'time per furlong' it was almost identical.

The only problem was that she wasn't sure whether Door Boy would be able to go any faster, the form indicating that he was a little one paced.

'Should be much of a muchness,' she concluded. 'All things being equal, the field should finish in a straight line.'

At five minutes to two on the Friday, I sent an email to Kath with the subject line 'They're off'.

Five minutes later, another entitled 'Result coming soon'.

Fifteen minutes after the race, I pulled up the result and emailed her with the subject line 'And the winner is...' followed by the body 'Medermitt'.

The email I got back was short and to the point.

It read, 'I fancied that one.'

If there's one thing guaranteed to get up my nose, it's fellow believers telling me that they *knew* God was going to move in the way that He just has - especially when they've covered just about every conceivable possibility as they've considered the problem we've been faced with and pronounced various permutations over the weeks and months as the trouble has evolved, swinging from positive statements of victory to passive encouragements of acceptance.

I'm quite honest to admit that my understanding of how a race will pan out and who will eventually get their head in front may not be - indeed, it isn't - consistently accurate, but it's actually a whole lot *more* accurate than when I try to work out the way God is going to work His will in to a situation.

In fact, my own understanding of a Divine remedy is normally so appallingly poor that I sit down and wonder whether I'm actually in touch with Him at all.

In trying to be positive and to give God the glory for the solution He brings about, we actually undermine the necessary acknowledgement of the humility of our frailty.

In elevating the solution to the point of being 'God said it, that's why it happened', we also elevate our own standing with God beyond that which it is and show ourselves up *not* to be reflections of the Divine that we claim to serve but actually people who will use just about anything to *make it seem* like we have a deep and meaningful relationship with God.

We would do better to say 'I had eighty-seven different ideas about what He was going to do and need Him to open my eyes afresh' than to deceive ourselves in to thinking we were in touch with the moving of the Spirit.

To admit frailty is more of a strength than a weakness in Christ, but to claim insight when there *is* none is to profess blindness.

HUNTINGDON

Thursday 11 December 2008

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the Lord.
Proverbs 21:31

INTRODUCTION

We have always found that arriving early at a race meeting is the best option - when you're the first person through the turnstiles, you get the opportunity to walk round the grandstand and paddock and to choose what you feel will be the best vantage point from which to watch the racing.

There's also the opportunity to witness the 'setting up' by the officials and services because, although they should really be ready to 'rock n roll' the moment the first person comes through the gate, they rarely are.

You also get the chance to ask officials questions that you wouldn't normally get time to do - after all, when the crowds start arriving, their hands are all to the pumps to keep the meeting ticking over like a well-oiled machine and to tend to all the problems that arise from having a thousand or two spectators, owners, trainers and jockeys needing attention.

It's during those two hours before the first race when you can ask about where the winning horse in the seller will be auctioned off (as we did at Sedgefield) or to wander along the line of bookies and enquire about their computerised machinery and how much they take is 'off course' rather than 'on course' for, if you've ever been to a meeting recently, you'll realise that prices fluctuate for no apparent reason other than the guy behind the board deems it necessary after he's looked at the computer screen.

In my younger days, such technology wasn't available and you had to run up and down the boards to find the best price for the horse you wanted to back - now, with the advent of brightly lit boards, you can stand at the viewing points and see where the best prices are without getting any exercise whatsoever.

But, I digress.

Part of the reason for getting to meetings so early is to eat lunch in a less crowded cafe or restaurant - by the time the gaggle of punters arrive half an hour before the first race, you can hardly move in either the bars or eating facilities and it makes the day too 'rushed'.

We were first at the counter when it opened at 11am and glanced up at the board to see what they had on offer. Instinctively, we went for the steak pie (which, in fact, wasn't a pie at all - simply some stewed beef with a crispy piece of filo pastry balanced on top) and vegetables, a good filler to last until the evening on the way home for a sit down Little Chef.

After acquiring our cutlery and sauces we took our seat close to the counter and were distracted by a conversation going on behind us for, there on the wall was the option for 'Soup of the Day' - except that it wasn't too obvious what flavour it was.

Enter a punter with an inquisitive mind and a hand full of loose change, wanting to get something to tide him over to the evening but not wanting to waste too much money on food.

'Tell me, love,' he began, 'what's the Soup of the Day?'

The young girl serving behind the counter was obviously new to the job. Our order had been dished out after taking instructions as to what a 'steak pie' consisted of and, to be totally honest, we felt that she had piled our plate up so full that, if we had been jockeys, we couldn't have met any of the required weights.

She disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared moments later, announcing loudly to the entire queue - as well as to those present in the sparsely populated and echoey room - 'It's Lentil Brothel, sir.'

Immediately, I felt myself choke on the fork full of processed peas I'd just crammed into my mouth. There was a loud voice heard from the kitchen that shouted, 'I said "Broth"! and the young girl went bright red.

Incredibly, because the day's racing was so serious, the race goer who'd asked the question hardly batted an eyelid and opted for a bowl of the brothel - perhaps he thought it came with a couple of dumplings?

Leaving the restaurant, we wandered along the side of the track and noticed a marquee erected for the display of locally produced arts and crafts. Somehow, Kath and I got separated and I found myself eyeing some jewellery on a stall that was both pretty and highly expensive.

This is the only *disadvantage* of being early at the races - when you want to blend in to the background and to browse quietly without being accosted by the seller, it's almost impossible to do so. In a few short seconds, I became the object of the sales pitch.

'How about buying a piece of jewellery for your Darling?' she began, still removing boxes from her carrying crates and placing them neatly onto the display table.

'When you go home tonight and your Darling greets you, you can give her this lovely item and it won't matter if you've lost all your money - she won't be able to think of you as having done anything wrong.'

I looked at her with surprise.

'Well,' I replied, 'I have my wife with me today - so who is this "Darling" about whom you speak?'
After that, I was left alone - all alone.

If there's ever a racecourse that's crying out *not* to be revisited, it's Huntingdon - the facilities are great and I can't fault them on the way the grandstand and paddock are laid out but, as a viewing track, I'd give it a wide berth any day.

The track is so flat that you'd have to have a huge grandstand to be able to look out over the course - as it is, the best you can do is to see horse and jockey heads bobbing over the running rail that obscures them mainly from view.

The positioning of a lake (a natural feature, it has to be said) that reflects the sunlight into the spectators' eyes is also not a selling point, especially as it hinders you from seeing about a sixth of the course and at least one fence.

And then there are those skilfully sited portakabins - did they really need to be erected to obliterate a furlong of the track, a bend and another fence?

At least at Sedgefield you may lose sight of the runners as they go behind a copse of trees and dip down round the side of a small hillock but that's the romance of the track - it's rustic, has charm and is an echo of former years and past times.

But Huntingdon is just flat - boringly so.

It's hard to imagine that form here is much more than a remote indication of a horse's ability at the annual Cheltenham Festival. To me, it feels just like a betting track rather than a spectacle, a place to spend an afternoon trying to make money rather than an experience of National Hunt racing 'at root level'.

It's truly a shame that, if this is the way jump racing is headed, in twenty years from now we may have extricated most of the challenges of the sport and presented it back to the public as a sanitised and uninspiring way to lose money.

And that was *not* what racing is about.

THE TWELVE TEN

Thursday 11 December 2008

When it comes to perfection, most of us base our consideration on evidence that's easily discernible - a sofa may look clean and perfect, an acquisition that matches our decor and that looks as comfortable as anything else does in the display rooms.

It isn't until you get it home and find lumps that stick in your back, the springs that break when overweight Uncle Ernie collapses onto it after a particularly full eating session at the Christmas Dinner table and the upholstery rips apart at seams that were never correctly sown and that, even if they had been, thread has been used that was about as strong as cotton wool.

Our assessment of perfection is particularly warped when it comes to our ability only to judge a matter with our eyes and not to look further below the surface to determine the heart.

In truth, nothing can be considered perfect until it has been tested to the extremes of what it's been designed to achieve, when the object has excelled at everything that's been thrown at it and shown to be more than adequate for the job at hand.

The same is true with horseracing, of course, but seldom does an onlooker consider carefully the events that unfold before their eyes or try to get underneath the bonnet, so to speak, to see whether the half a litre engine that seemed to make the car roar down the hill will be sufficient to accelerate the vehicle over the crest of a Swiss mountain.

Such is life.

When Tot Of The Knar decimated an eight horse field at Sedgefield on Tuesday, it looked every bit a conquering hero.

Barely troubled by the pace, it cruised - nay, it walked - into the lead somewhere before the second flight of hurdles from home and, running down to the final obstacle put on a burst of speed that made observers wonder whether the chasing equines had actually stopped for a breather, a cup of tea and an overnight stay at a bed and breakfast.

Up the run in, the jockey looked over his shoulder to check for dangers and only saw a green expanse with

some small dots on the horizon with steamy breath rising from them.

With the advent of technology and the popularity of racing enjoying a resurgence amongst the general public, it's easy to access the race and to view it repeatedly if one so desires - but you don't need to watch it more than once to see the supremacy with which Tot Of The Knar strolled up the run in to victory.

What happened in the following day and a half is probably safe to surmise.

Having returned to the home yard fresh and raring to go, the staff immediately eyed a further first prize at Huntingdon on the Thursday - a prize that was double that earned at Sedgefield - and proceeded to prepare their horse for the shorter journey across into Cambridgeshire from Wales to contest it.

Boringly predictable, nothing out of the ordinary transpired and, after the preliminaries for both horse and jockey, the partnership lined up at the start, a hot fancy to get their noses in front at the finish.

All was going perfectly well for the majority of the race.

Tot Of The Knar was both travelling well and felt relaxed under the jockey's patient ride. Four fences from the finish - and seeing horses all around him starting to struggle - he let out the reins and the horse sped off into a clear advantage just as had been done two days previous.

From where we were stood in the stands, we couldn't help but believe that we were watching history repeating itself and fully expected the filly to disappear from the field up the straight to record a well-earned second victory in three days.

The betting market, also, was structured to make the viewer believe that you had but two choices - either you sided with Tot Of The Knar to pick up the prize money or else you could have each of the remaining thirteen horses in the field to win.

The horse's supremacy was considered to be so unchallengeable that those who thought they could find a horse that might adequately defeat the favourite shook with the fright that such a thought brought with it.

Was it really conceivable that a horse that had won so impressively and with so much in hand could find this field too good for it?

As they turned into the home straight, the question was about to be answered in a somewhat dramatic style.

The final bend had seen one challenger emerge from the pack - another filly by the name Circus Rose - and she squeezed her way alongside the Knar as they lined up for the final straight.

The jockey wasn't worried, however, and asked his charge for a quick turn of foot to pull away to the finish - all he got, however, was a gasp and a wheeze and nothing more.

Although, at Sedgefield, there had been nothing to draw alongside her, to look her squarely in the eye and to say, in effect, 'You got anything left to stop me taking you?', here at Huntingdon it was different.

Circus Rose was asking her a serious question about whether she was as perfect as she looked, testing the facade of the previous Tuesday and demanding not to see whether she looked any good in a bloodless victory but whether she had the nous to put herself on the line and to go on to overcome a challenger.

Many of the crowd groaned as Circus Rose was announced to have taken the lead and to have drawn ahead coming to the final flight. As Tot Of The Knar struggled up the run in, it was clear to everyone concerned that the horse simply didn't have what it took to get its head in front on this occasion.

Though the filly had looked a perfect prospect, it wasn't until that perfection was tested that it was seen not to be as imagined.

And, in a very similar fashion, the believer should never think of themselves as able to deal with each and every situation that comes their way through a blind assessment of their fragile ability but, rather, should be aware that trials come upon them to prove and perfect, to demonstrate weakness and, unlike the Knar, to have strength offered by the hand of Him who rescues his children when they acknowledge their need and turn to Him.

Only when the victory is truly the Lord's will the genuine victory truly come.

Every other victory is purely a facade.

FLOGGING A DEAD HORSE

Thursday 20 November 2008

What can I do with my obsession?
With the things I cannot see?
Is there madness in my being?
Is it wind that blows the trees?
from 'Obsession' by Delirious

In the late seventies and early eighties, I used to be a Betting Office manager in Central London. In those days, the make up of a bookies was a whole lot different.

For one, you couldn't see in - the law was such that, although you were allowed to advertise your wares on the outside (to a certain extent), you weren't allowed to see what went on within. That wasn't particularly a problem and it was possibly more beneficial to the punter not to feel that he was on display than to keep the pedestrians from being enticed in.

But the office *within* was fundamentally different from what we see today - you see, you weren't allowed to provide entertainment to keep someone there.

So we had (an innovation while I was there) six black screens that contained white text that displayed betting shows, results and the non runners for races later on in the day and a loudspeaker that announced the price changes and, where possible, the commentaries of the races (if the line between the commentary position and the headquarters didn't break as it was wont to do).

There was also a much more peaceful feel to the place - and an intentional break in racing that saw it begin in the afternoon with horses and a couple of greyhound meetings to supplement them when the winter months came and meetings could often be abandoned.

You also got night meetings in the summer when the daylight sometimes extended to nine or ten o'clock.

On Saturday, there was a 'special' dog meeting at Hackney that started at eleven and never (absolutely never) did you get a High Street Betting Office open on a Sunday, even when the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe was taking place in France.

In the winter, a typical day would see the horses start around twelve noon and end with the last dog race before four thirty - in summer, racing started a little before two, could run til five and a 'night meeting' could start around six or a little later although, by that time, nearly all the punters had gone home (and we often wondered why we ourselves weren't allowed to depart, too, long before the latest time of six thirty).

Now fast forward thirty years.

You can see everything that goes on inside from the street which is the first noticeable difference. There's a slot machine in the corner and sometimes even a coffee machine - and the series of screens that are located around the office allow you not only to see the odds in glorious colour but also to watch the live races around the UK as they take place, the meetings arranged so that no two races overlap unless they run late.

And there's International racing, too - from South Africa and the States - and, from nearer to home, Ireland and France (we owe it all to satellite technology).

The greyhounds begin *every day* at eleven in the morning and there hardly seems to be a break in the proceedings as soon as the action starts - and don't forget the computerised racing simulations, too, with graphics that are probably more laughable than the idea you can assess the form and calculate the best horse at the odds with a chance.

The races go off every few minutes - there must be at least fifty races a day that you can bet on in the UK alone. Just yesterday, I counted forty-six greyhound races in the morning or late afternoon and one hundred and seven in the evening.

It's like having a multitude of different voices but with no distinct message, when one race after another merges into insignificance in the same way that the reading of endless amounts of literature produces confusion rather than clarity of purpose.

And now there's floodlit horse racing on all-weather tracks that run alongside the greyhounds, odds on football and other sporting events, too, that were only just beginning to take hold thirty years ago - the offices are open on Sundays, too, a race day that's just as busy as any other.

If there's anything designed to fuel an addiction it's the availability of races to bet on. I know for a certainty that you won't end addiction by closing down the shops in the High Street but by reducing the *amount* of races available and by providing times when there's *nothing* then, at the very least, you'll confine the problem to three or four hours during each day and not allow it to bleed over into the more social parts of the day in which all men

and women need to participate.

Having notices about 'Responsible gambling' and having the url of 'Gambleaware' plastered at various points round the office aren't going to do very much for the hardened punter - and, let's face it, the bookies thrive on the addictions of others and, even though they may invest time and money into the idea, they won't be very enthusiastic to promote a cause that undermines their own livelihood.

An addiction to gambling takes various forms at one time or another.

It's too simplistic to say that a compulsive gambler is a person who 'can't stop' because that's a conclusive statement that doesn't look at the desires and emotions that come from within and that the will continues to submit to.

When the compulsion grips you, it can often start with a fear - a fear that, unless you back a certain animal, it's going to win and you're going to miss out on a sure return. Even more so when the 'omens' point towards the animal or when the horse 'owes you money' because it lost you a packet the last time it ran.

An addiction doesn't mean always that you can't stop - but that you are compelled to continue by rational arguments and plausible reasoning that are every bit a part of your life as the habit we all have of breathing air and feeding the body with food.

There are usually the recriminations and feelings of guilt after the day has ended and you have less than you started with (although, now that racing never seems to end and there is little - if any - time for reflection, that state of mind is less likely to occur), but the desire to continue because 'tomorrow will be a better day' normally lies close at hand - and then you spot a certainty in the two thirty that you'd be a fool to miss out on.

At Market Rasen - as at probably all other horse race tracks - there's an on course betting office where you can place bets on every race as if you were standing in your local High Street shop.

They certainly can be useful to place small bets that the Tattersalls bookies won't accept, but I've always felt that their presence is somewhat of an enigma.

Surely, the reason you go to a racecourse is to take part in the day, to experience the parade ring first hand, the crowds, the atmosphere, to freeze your butt off in the howling northerly gale and to get soaked in the torrential downpour just before the two thirty?

But, amazingly to me, no sooner had a race finished and we were walking up to the Winners Enclosure, than the Betting Shop was jam packed with punters looking up at the screens, scribbling down selections and placing bets on races at tracks far away from the course.

Indeed, for all I know, the shop may well have been packed even *during* the last race at the track - and I wouldn't be surprised if, when we go to another meeting, I sneak off quietly as the runners come under Starter's Orders to see how many people are still in the shop and that it's full to overflowing, people oblivious to the meeting that they supposedly came to experience.

Most people have addictions - though some are more destructive than others.

The person who collects, for example, nineteenth century silverware - or who collects Smurfs in all their weird promotional shapes and forms - is every bit an addict as is the gambler. They would find it just as hard to stop increasing their collection as the punter would to stop having 'just one more bet'.

They may have their addiction under control - as many punters also do - but to come to the point where they actually say 'I will no longer take any interest in plastic bottle tops and will give my entire collection away' is a step that few would take, even though they probably don't view their own addiction as being anything like in the same league as that of the gambler.

Indeed, they very well may condemn the alcoholic, druggie, chain smoker and obsessive gambler for a lifestyle that they can 'choose to stop' - and yet they don't come to terms with their own addiction and see that it's potentially as lethal and destructive as any of the 'biggies'.

And there's the religious addict, too - every bit as fixated and dependant upon all things religious as the gambler except, in this case, it can be even better justified because it's 'following the Divine'.

An Antiques Collector may, one day, wake up to the fact they've wasted thousands - or hundreds of thousands - of pounds on objects that serve no real useful purpose, or a gambler may see a light as if on the road to Damascus and seek counselling and help to turn his back on something that has been eating away at and destroying him for years. But it's incredibly rare that a person addicted to religion will ever come to their senses because there is a more powerful fear in their own lives that turning their back - as they perceive it - on 'God' means the certainty of damnation, of falling away into error and heresy, of being eternally lost because they didn't press onward until the close of their own life and the beginning of the new one after death.

There are certain traits of the religiously addicted that can be easily observed.

You'll see them buying the latest christian books, CDs and DVDs for the insights they can offer them, attending all the meetings out of compulsion (and yet justifying it because they're 'wholly seeking after God') and being so full of God that their speech rarely - if ever - goes on to the necessity of buying two pounds of sprouts and a bag of carrots to eat but, rather, is always about God, spiritualising just about everything to make it sound like they're receiving revelation on a moment by moment basis.

The gambler does exactly the same, though - you'll watch them studying the form continually (paralleled in the endless reading of christian books), attending the bookies daily for their fix (going to all the church meetings both locally and far distant) and forgetting about their own livelihood and well-being just so they can follow their addiction (missing meals and ignoring their appearance).

At worst, the religiously addicted surround themselves with activities and thoughts that don't allow God in, that put up a barrier that forbids entry to the moving of the Holy Spirit - so much so that, when God does finally break through and speak directly to them as individuals, they can't accept that it's His voice and justify rejecting the revelation as being detrimental to the religious life they've already built for themselves.

After all, why would God directly oppose the spiritual life they have when they're obviously serving God and running after following Him? Fear to change often raises its head, denying a person both the freedom to escape and the reception of a true spiritual relationship.

For following Jesus is neither about addiction nor obsession. It's certainly about having times of compulsion given by the Holy Spirit when doing God's will is so important that earthly life is neglected to fulfil the burden passed on from above, but there are times and seasons in a believer's life when there's an ebb and flow of activity.

The commitment should never change, of course, although the activity will - but an addiction and obsession compels the religious to continue onward regardless of where God leads for fear that, somehow, a lack of progression is a sign of backsliding.

There's no doubt that a believer in Christ has a twenty-four-seven relationship with Him - but a similar relationship with an earthly friend doesn't mean that you'd expect to be talking to them non-stop throughout the day (or you'd soon grow nauseous of their company and drop them like a brick).

Neither does it follow that to have Jesus present continually means that He speaks constantly, that you're aware of His guiding hand on a moment by moment basis or that He expects you to consistently forsake everything earthly and necessary for the body's well-being.

And neither does it mean that the believer should be so addicted to 'all things religious' that they fear nipping out to the toilet to have a pee when they're bursting in the middle of a sermon in case they'll miss God's voice.

He's actually able to communicate equally well inside the toilet as well as without (and don't forget Wesley's immortal hymn line 'My chain fell off'), in the line at the supermarket, on the bus as you go to work or - and this is where I hesitate typing the conclusion - at a National Hunt horse race meeting in the depths of winter.



THE TWO FORTY-FIVE AT KEMPTON

Saturday 27 December 2008

The Two Forty-Five at Kempton began with the Twelve-Forty at Huntingdon on Thursday 11 December 2008, the day of the second Tot of the Knar race that you've previously read. In fact, if the truth be told, it started even before that when Aimigayle, the subject of this article, reappeared after a summer rest at Chepstow over hurdles.

I could go in to the form of her first four races here, but a brief summary will suffice seeing as the precise details aren't too important.

Aimigayle likes to lead, to set the pace and to attempt to let no horse come by her. To do that, she needs a jockey on board who can tactically judge a race with a pace that both Aimigayle can achieve and the remaining horses can't - and that's no mean ability.

The horse also jumps predominantly to the right - a problem that's insignificant if you're running on a right-handed course but, when she first ran over chase fences at Fontwell (one of the few figure of eight courses in the world), she went so far to the right to clear the obstacles that she was nearly running in the grandstand where the spectators stand, squandering what chance she had and only managing a second.

And, again, Aimigayle is a stayer - you wouldn't imagine that she has the pace to burn off a field of two mile gallopers even if she was given a furlong start, but give her three miles - if the jockey paces it right - and she'll be able to maintain a gallop that will have the rest struggling to get home.

So, when she ran at Kempton, a right-handed track, and over a distance of three miles on 26 November 2008, it was no surprise that she was prominent from the start, led early on and nothing could pass her as they turned in to the straight.

This is what she was built for, the conditions that suit her nature that see her fulfil the promise that she brings to the small stable where she's trained and developed.

At Huntingdon, however, not everything was in her favour.

True, the course was right-handed and she stuck closely to the rails as she began the race in charge at the front. But, given a distance of two and a half miles, it was always going to be too short and, when the favourite, Shatabdi, came to challenge before they approached the second last, she could find no more and kept on, one paced, in second place.

And this was a chase, too, more solid fences than the hurdles at which she appears to be a better animal for, when speed is the key, she finds it easier to skip over the smaller obstacles.

If it's no surprise that a fish dies when it's taken out of water and left on the shoreline, then neither should it be any surprise that a horse, not given the right conditions for it to show its best, will always look disappointing no matter how much you try to mask your disappointment by pretending that you were pleased with its run.

Some time after the Huntingdon race, the owner and trainer must have put their heads together and wondered where next to try the horse.

To their credit, they decided to choose a race with much higher prize money (over four times more than that which was on offer previously) but one that would suit Aimigayle's ability almost perfectly - a right-handed track that helped her to jump, a hurdle race to play to her speed and a distance of three miles that would underscore her stamina.

That race was the Two Forty-Five at Kempton on Saturday 27 December 2008.

The racing company covering the meeting switched to a pair of plastic Wellington boots with all manner of pictures of vegetables splashed over them.

I'd seen green kiddies' boots before with two reptilian eyes glaring from the toes - something that I thought was particularly neat - but never, absolutely never, such multicoloured footwear that the presenter had found on his journey round the enclosures (if anybody ever finds a shop where they're on sale, they must let me know - I need a pair).

They obviously belonged to a race goer.

As the camera panned back, however, it was obvious that they *didn't* belong to a race goer but to the owner of Aimigayle, standing in the paddock area shortly after the horses had left for the post.

The interview that followed was somewhat bizarre - perhaps one of the more existential conversations that's ever graced the corridors of horse racing - as they chatted about gardening, the owner commenting that the pair of boots on his feet were good for him as he did, in fact, grow a lot of his own produce and, just as an aside, mentioned that he had a bag of carrots in his plastic Tesco bag for after the race.

It's one of those strange occasions when I could actually hear the presenter's mind working, asking himself

'Do I ask him about the carrots or not?'

Fortunately, he must've been egged on by the Producer in his earpiece and he popped the question that, by now, all the viewers were urging him to ask.

'What are the carrots for?'

'Aimigayle,' came the reply, 'she always gets carrots once she's finished the race. She deserves them and she's come to expect them from me.'

The presenter pulled at the plastic bag and the owner lifted the sealed supermarket produce into the air (it obviously wasn't the season for his home grown produce), ripping them open in preparation of the horse's return to show the viewers.

Then it struck me that, far from being an owner who wanted his equine to win, he was actually concerned to make sure that the charges he owned knew that, if they ran for him, he would always reward them - win or lose - and that, after each race, they could always look forward to a treat for doing their best and carrying his colours.

For, while many owners will walk their winning horse into the unsaddling enclosure and give them a pat on the neck or side for running well and milk the applause from the crowds, to this owner it went beyond that - he wanted the horse to know in a material way that he was proud that they had done their best in his name.

For some reason, it seemed like the world was trying to get money on to Aimigayle - from early morning, the price of the horse had been cut, cut again, recut and slashed as it was backed in to second favourite.

It was, I was sure, something that the discerning punters had seen in the form and the reason behind the owner and trainer choosing this race above any other - it was the best distance, best type of obstacle and best track, something that it had never yet been given all in the same package.

Even its form was none too shabby and, looking at the weight on its back, it appeared as if it was carrying a feather compared to the others whose legs seemed to be splayed at four points of the compass even before the jockeys mounted in the parade ring.

As they came under the Starter's orders, Colin Bolger the jockey pushed Aimigayle a few lengths in front of the others who must've been sleeping for, when the tape went up, the horse was already eight lengths in the lead as they headed down to the first flight.

I probably don't need to tell you that, if you have a confirmed front runner in a race, you do *not* - under any circumstances - let them have a cheap lead.

From there on, the jockey needed to judge the pace perfectly. As they passed the finishing post for the final circuit, it appeared as if everything was going according to plan but, very soon afterwards, it became evident that the field was starting to close on her as they neared the furthest point and turned for home.

But it was here that the jockey gave the horse a breather, knowing that to sacrifice a few lengths would be more than made up for by the spurt of acceleration that he intended to ask Aimigayle for half a mile from home.

Bang on cue, the horse was asked to quicken after three out and, within a few strides, the field were obviously struggling to keep up - indeed, they were starting to fall back at a significant speed except for one filly called Hora who relentlessly crept closer to come along side as they approached the last.

With Aimigayle's legs starting to buckle under her from the pace she'd set for the past three miles, the jockey tapped her lightly at the last and got a decent jump - Hora, on the other hand, had put so much in to closing the gap on the leader, she fairly demolished the last flight of hurdles, wood splintering and stakes flying in to the air after her.

But, again, not to be outdone and showing a determination and courage beyond the call of duty, Hora closed up the run in, Bolger holding his charge together as best he could, seeing the post loom larger and larger into view as the hot breath of Hora steamed into his left boot, drawing alongside and straining her muscles to overhaul the leader.

As the day would have it, Aimigayle kept her nose in front by a neck - the distance made it seem that it had been all fairly comfortable in the end - and fulfilled the promise that the situation had dictated.

In the Winners Enclosure, the presenter caught up with the owner as the horse walked round the small area reserved for the victor. Noticing that the carrots were still secreted away in the carrier, he asked, 'Haven't you given her the carrots yet?'

The owner turned his head and explained, 'No, not yet. She has to go and have the dope test first - but she'll get them soon enough.'

As he got called up to the presentation rostrum to receive the trophy, the owner tapped a security guard on the shoulder, handed him the Tesco bag and said, 'Here, take care of these for a few minutes, will you?'

They may only have been two pounds of carrots, but to one five-year-old mare, they were the reward she

had been racing for.

If there's one thing that annoys me in the Church - and, if you've read a few of the articles I've composed over the years you'll realise that this phrase is a particular favourite of mine - it's believers being put into situations that they should never find themselves in.

For some unknown reason, tea making appears to be the pre-requisite of spiritual blessing in many evangelical and pentecostal circles and, if God wants you to be used 'with signs and wonders following', it means that, unless you're willing to put your name on the church cleaning rota, it's impossible that He would be able to move through you and fulfil the calling.

I've always found it strange because, when I read the history of the early Church in the New Testament, I don't find Paul of Tarsus receiving the Divine visitation, being commissioned to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth amongst the Gentiles and yet being told by the elders of the Church in Jerusalem, 'Well, Paul, it's like this - Peter and John need their sandals repairing so be a good brother and pop down to Honest Joseph the sole-sticker and see to it, will you?'

No way.

He *may* have continued to use his profession of tent-making to financially support himself while he was trying to bring the Gospel to areas throughout the Roman Empire, but he didn't *have to* take up menial employment to be taken seriously or to be considered worthy to be used by God.

If the resemblance of the modern day Church appears to be more like a bird with a broken wing rather than a soaring eagle, it's because we have people trying to fulfil callings and ministries that God has never called them to, while the children of God that God's hand is heavy upon get shuffled to the back because, although they know their Divine appointment, Church leadership refuse to let them fulfil it.

What the Church is desperately in need of is *not* square pegs in round, restrictive holes but a few hurdle races over three miles on right-handed tracks that they can excel on.



RETROSPECTIVE

This article was written shortly after the first release of 'Winners and Losers'. As such, it appears as if it's separate from that series of articles and I refer to the booklet as if it's something else. But the article is an integral part of the messages related and, as it offers a fitting conclusion to the original release, it's here included in the order in which it was composed.

Hindsight is a wonderful creature.

With it, we elevate past situations to the position of Divine visitations or denounce them as satanically inspired. But, to the people who often find themselves in the present *within* one of them, the source and movement of the event isn't always as cut and dried - if ever.

As I said, hindsight is an incredible animal (if ever I own a racehorse, I may well decide to name it such).

However, once a pronouncement has been made, it's difficult for a believer to ever change their mind, to have their opinions altered even if 'new evidence' comes to light and the 'truth' of a situation previously perceived is undermined by it.

So, if a time of a person's life is decided upon as being 'from God', we insist that it can be from no one else because we feel that to change our opinion is to deny the very character and presence of God - actually, it does nothing of the sort and, perplexingly, it's actually more a comment on our *own* unchangeable will and nature than it is a matter of faith.

For, changing our mind on a matter is tantamount to undermining our own foundational belief *in our own perceptions* rather than a denial of God's hand in a matter - God is actually quite understanding when we admit to our own frailty and confess that we got it totally and wholly wrong and turn to Him for forgiveness and strengthening for, after all, the blessed people are the poor in spirit, those who admit their weaknesses and blindness, for to them belong the Kingdom of Heaven.

The problem with our own 'insight' is that it's often based upon a distorted perception of the character and nature of God, upon a misunderstanding of the Scriptures and, even, on a fixation upon our own particular denominational tradition rather than on a revelation and continued communion with the presence of the Spirit of God.

We forget that the same God who told Hosea to go and marry a prostitute, who commanded Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot amongst the children of God is the same One who commands His people to do strange - nay, pretty damned peculiar - things in the midst of a generation of believers who have started to grow tired of hearing His voice and of obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

To such were both Hosea *and* Isaiah sent - a desperate people need a hard-hitting message that comes with a delivery that will catch their attention, something that's so far removed from the norm that it's impossible for a laid back, indifferent response.

If we judged God's choice of David correctly we'd realise that, under the Law, He should never have given him a second glance for he was descended from a Moabite and no offspring 'even to the tenth generation' was to ever be admitted to the children of God - but not only did He choose him, He chose him to be the line through which the Messiah was to be brought to earth.

Are you sure you got that one right, God?

When Jackie Pullinger was told to 'Go!', she wasn't readily believed. How could God tell a young convert to move out from a protective and caring fellowship into the world to preach the Gospel to the unsaved when she didn't know the first thing about social evangelisation and the correct structure of a fellowship?

Actually, it was probably because she *didn't* know anything about these matters that was one of the reasons why God *did* call her to do a work for Him. Had she tried to impose those sorts of structures into the world of Hong Kong, the Spirit would have been unlikely to have been able to move in any real power.

And, when Wesley went about preaching the Gospel to men and women in the open air, he seriously offended the established Church because it was all fairly obvious that to announce the message of the Gospel outside the walls of the sanctuary was to cut across the revealed will and purpose of the God who he professed to serve.

But God doesn't operate within our pre-defined conceptions and will not be restricted by our own views about what He both can and can't do. He seems to take a delight in operating outside the box, of showing His people that, just when they thought they had His character carefully mapped out and He was becoming predictable, He will pop up with another work that's almost impossible to accept, believers think, without denying their belief in Him.

The Pharisees - the leaders of the children of God in the early pages of the New Testament - were one such group of people who had their perception of God radically challenged by Jesus.

Seeing Him going to the common people, sinners and the non-religious, their traditional religion condemned the practices, so much so that, when He started casting out satanic spirits in their midst, they couldn't accept it as being of God and had to interpret it as being nothing other than satan doing a work in their midst, condemning themselves to a place where it was impossible that God could reach them with the Gospel.

It's important that *all things* are tested and assessed in the light of both Scripture and the direct speech of the Holy Spirit for not all wacky and crazy things can be accepted as being 'of God' - the problem in the Church, however, has too often been that we judge matters by our own preconceived ideas, laws and traditional viewpoints, so bringing a misunderstanding to situations rather than correct explanations and insights.

If Scripture defines one certainty about the character of God it's this - that the character of God is indefinable. So much for our hermetically-sealed apostolic creeds for they don't allow God too much room for manoeuvre.

And, again, if there's one predictable thing about God that can be said, it's that He's unpredictable. Perhaps that's about the best creed we could have - expect the unexpected.

I'd certainly subscribe to it.

If we began and continued our walk with God on this basis, we'd be safe.

When we first distributed 'Winners and Losers' we were quite surprised at reactions, especially from the people who should know better.

And yet we were also not surprised at all.

Some believers, when they heard that we'd been to a couple of race meetings didn't believe that I was 'a gambling man' - actually, I'm not. I used to be, yes, before I was a believer, but I know the difference. It's the same as I used to be an alcoholic before I was a believer but now I will have the occasional glass of wine or pint of beer (real ale, of course).

One was out of control, the other is controlled by God.

Other people simply shunned us with silence, so much did we tread on their theological and cultural toes. People would look the other way when we discussed it with someone so that they could stay out of it and not have to compromise their 'faith'.

But the Bible doesn't condemn gambling at all - indeed, some of the methods used by believers were demonstrably variations of the concept applied to their spiritual experience, asking God to be in control of the process.

So, as an example, drawing lots to choose a successor to Judas Iscariot at the beginning of the Book of Acts was most definitely a gamble (something that some denominations actually believe was incorrect to do and that the apostle chosen wasn't God's selection) - but one that the believers expected God to be in and to take control over, deciding on the matter through the medium they chose.

Notice that - a method that *they* chose.

Wouldn't you expect that they would ask God the question as to which one they should accept as an apostle and then *let God choose the way He wanted to answer?*

But, no - they took a big gamble.

I don't intend going in to a treatise on gambling here as one already appears on my web site (and one appears at the end of these articles), put there a few years ago when the matter needed to be dealt with.

What has always surprised me, though, to give one extreme of the matter, is that it appears to be alright for believers to spend vast sums of money on their habits, hobbies, fashion accessories and cultural tastes (the list is not exhaustive) but that a pound or two spent yearly on the Grand National is tantamount to being in league with satan.

But I guess that each of us needs something to condemn out of hand so that we can try to justify our own lifestyles - a clear case of 'I'm not as bad as such-and-such - he gambles' or 'he drinks' or 'he watches football' or something else that the announcer would never want to do because they have no desire for it, never have done and, as such, have managed to use their own non-participation as a work of righteousness on their part.

Their own desires, of course, are demonstrably God-given because they're led by the Spirit.

One of the matters that needs dealing with is this - if God led us through a two month time of our life through the use of horse racing and gambling to reveal His purpose and to do a work within us, why didn't each and every horse we backed win?

After all, if God knows the end from the beginning, it must follow that He knows the result of every horse race that will ever take place. Why, then, didn't He tell us so we could go through the card and make a mint?

Or a full packet of them.

Such reasoning undermines the purpose of this season in our lives.

The purpose of God was *not* to win us vast sums of money (although, if He wishes to do this in the future, I don't have any objections) but to do a work *in us* and *with us*. The monetary provision was simply a way to make sure that we were where He wanted us to be at the right time, to watch the right races and so to record the stories that He wanted to be committed to paper.

We had only intended to go to *one* race meeting and we wouldn't have been happy with committing more than one hundred and fifty pounds for that day out. I wouldn't have been happy with earmarking six hundred pounds for four days out at the races. No way.

But God had other ideas.

We intended to go to Hexham *if* we broke even at Market Rasen - God didn't want us to go there so He said 'no' because we needed to see Nevsky Bridge win and wanted us to watch the story of Tot of the Knar unfold both there and at Huntingdon.

Without a win at Market Rasen, we wouldn't have gone to Sedgefield. Without a win at Sedgefield, we wouldn't have gone to Huntingdon. And without God overruling the weather conditions, neither of the last two meetings would have been on - and whether we actually get to the track at Towcester for a race meeting in January or whether we explore the area instead is open in my own mind (is there a need for any expansion of 'Winners and Losers'? At this present time I have no desire to do so and, besides, it seems to be fairly complete).

As I said at the very beginning, hindsight is a wonderful creature.

There is no way I could ever have told you that God was prompting us to go to Market Rasen but, having now been to three meetings with a final day out - all paid for - at Towcester, I can see God's hand very plainly in it all. I'm also thankful that I *didn't* see the Authorship of this season until recently when the first draft of 'Winners and Losers' was completed (although, since that first compilation, the work has doubled in length as a result of Aimigayle's win - and will increase in length once more with the addition of this article).

But, as I asked above, why didn't every single horse we backed win? Why didn't every horse that we selected for each of the races romp home? Having done a very brief calculation of this season of our lives, I can say that we probably had a wager of some kind or another on about forty races - and yet we've picked up money from only four of them (Upright Ima, Nevsky Bridge, Notre Pere and Aimigayle).

Why?

The present day Church has got in to the mindset that, for something to be from God, there must be visible and tangible proof of victory that those in the world can readily accept and affirm. Unfortunately, this isn't the way God works, for the loser has every bit as much to say to us as the winner (the articles about Door Boy, Dan Buoy, Tot of the Knar and Herbie are all based on losers).

If the Bible is to be believed, the people of God often saw what they thought was a defeat, only to realise that, in the defeat, a great victory was about to be or had been won without them realising it.

So, the disciples were dispersed after Jesus' death on the cross - it wasn't the way that the life of the Messiah was supposed to end and, as they'd put everything behind their trust in Jesus, His departure through crucifixion undermined their entire lives. They were distraught, defeated and bewildered.

But the apparent defeat was actually a great victory - they just couldn't see it.

Paul and Silas' incarceration at Philippi was also a defeat. The Gospel had been taking a strong hold in the city through their preaching - Lydia had been saved and the demonic had been cast out of a slave girl so that she could be set free from the oppression. However, what followed immediately hindered the Gospel - but the defeat was turned into victory by God and was the means whereby the prison guard and his household became believers.

In other words, it was only when the Gospel was successfully opposed, and Paul and Silas defeated, that the jailer was going to be in a position to be saved (why couldn't you have done it without the flogging and the incarceration in the stocks, God? Why did we have to suffer?).

Defeat - far from being the end of a story - is the way God begins a new chapter and fresh meaning in lives that follow Him.

And, again, Stephen's martyrdom was a defeat - and yet, because of the persecution that arose on account of it, the holy huddle of believers in Jerusalem were scattered far and wide so that it had the effect of bringing the Gospel to areas that otherwise would never have heard it, ultimately prompting the worldwide proclamation of the good news to the Gentiles.

Defeat, then, instead of being an enemy of the Gospel, is actually a friend - and the follower of Christ who's cast down because of circumstances that conspire against him shouldn't be castigated by the Church for being disobedient and having unconfessed sin in their lives (except when it's obvious that this *is* the case, of course), but they should try to encourage him to stand fast and persevere through the tribulation or trial because it will be the basis of a victory that will *eventually* be won - even though the defeat *will always be a defeat*.

In like manner, life is a mixture of both winning *and* losing - although, in Christ, even the losing becomes

the basis for winning!

So, I ask myself, would I really have wanted all seven winners at Market Rasen?

And I must answer 'no'.

There was only the one horse, one race that God needed me to write about and that was the seventh when Upright Ima stormed home in the Ladies' race.

Had we had the previous six winners, the race wouldn't have been all that special and I doubt if I would have thought about it as an individual event as I needed to. Indeed, if we had had the first six winners, we may well not have put what we did on the horse - having winners change the way you bet and, for us, had we at any time covered our money, we may well have withdrawn our intention to back the horse when the event came.

I'm actually *glad* we lost on the first six races because it was only as a result of the defeat that the victory in the seventh race made any sense.

As I have said elsewhere, Kath and I don't go to race meetings to make money - we go to have an enjoyable day out. If we can cover our expenses, all well and good, but that's not the reason we go - yet how I could possibly have imagined that a bet that would return us almost three times the amount we had gone with was 'covering our money' is beyond me.

But, because of what transpired, God paid for us to experience both Sedgefield and Huntingdon, to follow up on some horses that we needed to record stories for and so to produce 'Winners and Losers'.

It's only, sometimes, in defeat, that the victory makes any sense.

When War of Attrition lost the day after both Notre Pere and Aimigayle won, I knew something had changed - that this season we had been experiencing from sometime at the beginning of November had now come to an end.

I'm not sure just *what* has ended or, rather, what the sum total of the conclusion is.

I *do* know, however, that the reason for having a bet stopped - there was something that came to an end inside me that's impossible to describe as it's not something that can be put in to words.

While ever the season was with us - and this was after the Upright Ima race rather than before - there was a knowledge that I would have to be prepared to watch for certain races and certain horses (although I didn't know the when, what or who behind that knowledge), making sure that I didn't miss them.

But, when War of Attrition finished second in the Lexus on Sunday 28 December 2008, that understanding ended and between that date and 29 January 2009 (the scheduled meeting at Towcester), I knew there was nothing to do but wait - nothing to follow up, but simply to watch and enjoy the horse racing as we have done in times past.

Whether the meeting at Towcester will be on or not, I couldn't say with any certainty. Whether we have a bet at the meeting or not, again, I'm not sure - although I imagine we may have a couple of small wagers even if we mostly watch the events.

Perhaps Towcester is simply a way for God to give us a day out at His expense for no other good reason than that He likes blessing His children?

Gosh - now that's a frightening thought.

I wonder if it's heresy?



TOWCESTER

Thursday 29 January 2009

The previous articles were all written during November and December 2008 when the 'first round' of race meetings - the three at Market Rasen, Sedgefield and Huntingdon - had all been experienced.

At that time, we were still looking forward to one final race meeting at Towcester in January 2009 - an all-expenses paid trip - and I wrote accordingly.

Now that Towcester has been and gone, it was a difficult choice whether to go back and alter the text at the appropriate points or whether simply to leave it as it was. In the end, I decided that the more honest thing to do was to leave the text largely as it was (with a few minor alterations).

This consideration became necessary because the time shortly before, during and after the meeting threw up its own incidents and articles that I wanted to include in this work, to bring to a conclusion this season of our lives as being a time when we acknowledge and recognise God's great provision, work and building up of our relationship with Him that was solely His initiative.

It certainly seems that my initial belief recorded above that there appeared to be no good reason why 'Winners and Losers' needed to be expanded after the end of 'Retrospective' was incorrect.

I should also point out here that, between War of Attrition running on Sunday 28 December 2008 and the Towcester meeting on Thursday 29 January 2009, we had no gamble on any horses whatsoever - neither was there ever any reason to do so.

Both Kath and I were very aware that with the horse's second place in Ireland, the line had been drawn underneath the experience and that it shouldn't be rekindled *in our own strength and for our own purpose*.

Being God's time, any continuation had to be dictated by God and, as there was no leading, we kept the money to one side in anticipation of the day.

INTRODUCTION

The going at the course was officially described as 'heavy' - in fact, it had been described as this from the moment the five-day declarations had come out at the weekend and, with more rain falling over the next three days, we both wondered whether the meeting would be on and what going description there could be that was one worse than that declared.

When we arrived at about 10.30am, three hours before the first race, we immediately went over to the rails to take a look at the going ourselves.

Although we weren't allowed on the track, pacing up and down along the running rail was enough for us to see large volumes of water run over our boots and, further away from the winning post, the walkway was totally impassable unless we were both hippopotamuses - and only one of us was.

We had known that we had to think about horses that were real mud larks but, after we'd seen the nature of the ground, we decided that we didn't need a horse who enjoyed cantering through mud but, rather, we needed one that could swim and whose jockey was going to be equipped with water wings.

Perhaps the winners wouldn't be stamping their hooves on the ground so much as flailing them from side to side as if doing the breaststroke.

There are many things at a race course I'll tolerate.

The existence of a betting shop is one. Although I would use it maybe once a meeting, I would certainly not miss it if it didn't exist and the temptation it represents for punters to forget about the 'live racing' and to be there for betting's sake rather than for the spectacle would be removed from them.

Still, I'll tolerate it.

I'm also not appreciative of the 'sit down' restaurants where you can seal yourself away into a fully heated and air conditioned room to eat a nineteen course meal over the three hours of the race meeting, not even having to exit into the outdoors to put your bets on.

I wonder why people who do that ever come racing in the first place - better sit in a Real Ale pub, have a meal and put the telly on.

The idea of a winter's National Hunt race meeting is to 'get out' in the fresh air, freeze your fingers off and catch pneumonia at the very least. You can't feel you've 'done' a meet unless you come back with some British illness, acquired through inclement weather.

Still, the world is full of wimps and I can bear with them.

But one thing that really annoys me - nay, it makes my blood boil - is a screen the size of New Jersey placed on the other side of the track so that punters can watch the racing on it from the stands, instead of

following the runners round the course 'in the flesh'.

What was more annoying was that they'd plonked this monstrosity where, if you stood in the main viewing grandstand, it obscured two fences down the back straight and, as I looked round from our position in the 'secondary' grandstand that we had to stand in to avoid the screen's distraction, I noticed a great many spectators watching it even when the horses were coming up the home straight.

Please! Do me a favour!

The first race we decided to avoid as the prices of the horses we fancied were far too short but Kath came out with a theory that we decided to put to the test. She reasoned that horses with very large feet would be much better suited to running in squidgy conditions because they wouldn't sink so deeply in to the mud.

After all, a large surface area distributes weight much better than a small, pointed contact with the ground.

Trying to work out which horse was the one with the biggest front hooves wasn't easy as they paraded in the paddock prior to the jockeys' mounting and them coming out on to the track.

And the stable girls were a little suspicious of us as they led their charges around while we said to one another in not-very-quiet voices 'They're huge' or 'I've never seen a pair so tiny'. Still, we eventually narrowed it down to one of two selections and watched them race, one of them winning and the other trailing in nowhere.

Inconclusive as this was, we decided not to employ it in future races unless we couldn't choose between two horses that we liked equally.

The final race - the flat National Hunt bumper (how is it possible to have the word 'flat' and the phrase 'National Hunt' next to each other? Beats me) - Kath employed a totally different and, for me, radical tactic.

She theorised that, where speed is essential, the horse needs a big rear end because, she said, that's where all the muscle propulsion is and the bigger the backside, the more thrust.

I believed her.

I believe most things she tells me, even though she may tell you otherwise.

And the horse was called 'Blessed Forever', too. This had to be a 'good thing' (see my article 'Signs and Blunders' about the wisdom of doing this).

After the race, it was so obvious to both of us that the bigger the rear end, the more fat it will be carrying and, therefore, the slower it will go. Indeed, with the conditions the way they were, the more the weight, the more likely the horse is to sink in to the quagmire and *need* the extra muscle just to get out, let alone to propel itself forward.

But, at the very least, the day proved to be a limited scientific experiment into the wisdom of using equine attributes in the selection of racehorses and the unlikelihood of them winning.

THE THREE O'CLOCK

'Never give up, never surrender'
Galaxy Quest

I can't be absolutely sure of the full details that I'm about to relate.

For that, I'd need to speak to Woodlands Genpower himself to get the story straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, and that is now quite impossible.

I didn't pay the horse much attention in the parade ring as I didn't think it had a chance in the race, even though it was the market favourite and a lot of people were expecting it to win. Therefore, our time was spent looking at the others and seeing whether they looked ready for the three mile test of stamina that was laid before them.

Once it was all over, it was impossible to get close to the winners enclosure, too, as there were so many race goers - people who hadn't even backed the horse but who wanted to watch Woodlands Genpower return triumphant - that it would have been rude of me to push my way through to the front and to try to catch a few brief words with the grey gelding who was steaming in the January sun.

But, as far as I'm aware, the facts that I'm about to relate are accurate and true.

If they're not, I simply don't have an explanation for the race as it panned out.

Woodlands Genpower likes hills.

Personally, I think they're over-rated.

I remember when our 'Green Committee' at work sent round a questionnaire at work and asked us all what it would take for us to cycle in to work. I replied that they'd have to flatten out all of Sheffield's hills for a start.

When it comes to travelling from A to B, I have no objections to using a push bike but, in my day at school, there was nothing between those two letters in the alphabet yet, over time, gradients have been added that I simply don't appreciate.

Woodlands Genpower, however, is different.

For some reason, the horse can travel just as fast up them as it can down - which has the effect of making you think that it can't keep up with a faster horse but, at the same time, that it can put on a burst of speed and overtake it if it chooses.

The overriding factor is the gradient - people forget this - for if there was ever a race that was only ever uphill 'from A to B', there would never be a question as to who would win it.

At Towcester, however, the horse has an advantage - the last five furlongs start as a gradual gradient before rising even more steeply into a two furlong dash for the line up a hill that has to be close to the severity of the last fifty yards of the run in at Sedgefield.

The question is never 'Will Woodlands Genpower be in the lead round the first half of the course?' but 'Is Woodlands Genpower able to claw back the distance it's tailed off by over the final five furlongs?'

It's good that a jockey never gives in whenever there's a chance of securing place prize money with the charge under them for, I'm quite sure, in the three o'clock at Towcester, he would've pulled the horse up at the far side of the course and trotted home if he'd thought that winning was everything and being placed was nothing.

The three mile and half a furlong course at Towcester begins with a long stretch downhill. This caused no problems for, having conditions underfoot so heavy, each and every jockey was more than concerned that if they went off too fast at the start, their mounts would soon tire in the mud and be flagging to get the full distance.

So, descending into the back straight for the first time, Woodlands Genpower found the pace much to his liking and disputed the lead over the first few fences, quite content to sit alongside the front three or four as they ascended the hill back to the stands to pass the winning post for the final circuit.

From here, though, the racecourse is predominantly downhill, descents followed by what seem like short plateaus of flat ground that enable the horses to maintain the speed gathered on the decline before they drop down further - with Towcester Parish Church in the background - and swing right-handed into the back straight.

But all was clearly not well - the jockey was trying everything he knew to get the horse to speed up to stay with the leaders but, although he got momentary spurts of acceleration, there was no doubting that Woodlands Genpower was struggling to keep hold of the tail of the leaders.

Not literally, you understand, for, if it did that, it would be disqualified.

The horse appeared to be so tired that he was almost throwing the jockey out of the saddle with exaggerated leaps over two successive fences, putting all his strength in to avoiding the obstacles that there seemed to be nothing much left in the tank for the remaining mile of the race.

With some very accurate and informative commentary, the race caller announced to the spectators that Woodlands Genpower was struggling to stay with the pace of the leaders and was dropping back out of contention.

But the jockey didn't give up.

If he could've read the horse's mind at this point, he would've heard it shouting 'Be patient! There's got to be an incline near here soon - there was one on the first circuit!' for the horse knew that, once the leaders met the rising ground, their chance of winning was as good as over.

The next fence came up and the horse jumped wildly to the right, making the jockey readjust his position in the saddle and causing viewers from the stand to grimace at the chances of the 'course favourite' getting home in front - by now he was upwards of ten lengths behind and seemingly running on the spot. But, turning down the side of the course for home, they met the rising ground and the leading trio began to feel the strength sap from their legs.

Over two from home and in the straight, Woodlands Genpower pushed its way into third, gradually closing the gap on the two leaders, the jockeys beginning to realise that, although they thought they'd the race between them, there was now a white object with brown splatters of mud across its body starting to overhaul them up the run in.

With one to jump, the jockey held on to the horse, steadying him for one final effort and met it perfectly. With only two lengths to make up, the jockey pushed Woodlands Genpower out, watching as two very weary horses disappeared behind him, drawing away and crossing the line by a very comfortable margin.

To one grey gelding, it was a puzzle as to what all the fuss was about - to the losing jockeys, however, the re-emergence of the horse as it galloped past them was something equivalent to the raising of the dead - and, to the jockey on board Woodlands Genpower, he realised that, had he dropped his hands over half a mile from home and pulled his charge up, he would never have been riding back into the unsaddling enclosure as the

winner of the most gruelling and strength-sapping event on the racecard that day.



THE RUBBISH TIP

I had cause to access a Racing web site the other day in preparation for our final race meeting of the 'campaign' at Towcester and was greeted with the headline that their tipster had declared a certain horse as the best bet of the day and that it had won at a staggering seven to one.

In bold text, the headline subtitle asked me 'Were you on?'

Obviously, I wasn't.

If I *had* been on then I'm quite sure I would have known about it, collected my winnings and would even now be relaxing over a glass or two of decent red wine while I was accessing their web site.

I also noted that, on subsequent days, there was *no* headline that the same tipster had selected another incredibly priced winner and was quite sure, therefore, that he'd gone for a loser. However, I failed to see the headline subtitle 'How much did you lose on our tipster's naff selection?'

I'm also quite confident that, on the day of the race itself, there was no headline on the home page declaring 'Certain winner tipped today - get on and you'll win money, guaranteed'.

It seems, therefore, that such headlines announcing a winner must have the intention of getting the punter to come back to the web site - in preference to others - to see what insights and information can be gleaned from their articles and musings.

Indeed, it seems to be designed to promote the 'trust me' mentality that seems to be so prevalent and necessary in society today, a reliance upon an authority who's acknowledged to be so superior in their understanding of a particular subject that their word on a matter can be accepted without question.

So, we'll readily accept the statement of the scientist that cigarettes are bad for your health because *we* haven't done the research but *they* have and *they* have come to the inescapable conclusion that they must be detrimental.

And, being reinforced by seeing people we've known die from the habit, we naturally have our beliefs reinforced to justify the advice given by the medical scientists.

When they go public in the future and declare that genetically modified crops are of no danger to the environment - or to the men and women who eat them - we tend to go along with their prognostications because their track history, so to speak, has proven them to be a reliable word on any matter to which they divert their attention.

So it is with racing tipsters - it's all a matter of reliance.

A reliance that prompts punters to come back repeatedly to the 'authority', to the person who has a proven track record so that we can side with their particular viewpoint instead of choosing to have one of our own.

But there's another reason for making known the successful tipster (notice also that the headlines never tell you that they have twenty-eight different tipsters working for them and that it was only one of them who had their 'bet of the day' come in first).

It's about giving the punter a shortcut to success, for success in life is what most people appear to be aiming for and, to the punter, success isn't assessed in terms of the amount of second places, but in the quantity of winners that they were able to pick and bet on.

The punter *should* sit down with a form guide and go through each horse in the race to determine who *they* think will be the winner - they should use information and allow it to change their minds, to give them a unique decision so that, win or lose, they stand on their own belief at how the race will pan out.

But that's rare - it's not the mentality of the world.

Tipsters represent the hard graft in studying form, they represent the work itself, the experts in their field who've taken hours poring over a race to arrive at a conclusion that's the best attempt at a solution, better than the punter can possibly manage with his finite restrictions.

And it means that the punter is putting reliance upon their knowledge for personal success. Even if the horse runs like a donkey, no matter - the reason for supporting the nag with their money lay in an *authority* in the game, one whose words can be repeated as if they've come from within the punter themselves after a careful consideration of the facts at hand.

When a gambler tells you that they thought the favourite would win because it was 'two pounds better off for only a short head defeat last time and the going is now in its favour', it's sometimes - very often, in fact - because it's the tipster who said it in their morning column and they believed it.

It's strange that, when we look within the confines of the Church, we often find the very same principles at work, week in, week out.

The 'trust me' mentality has been hindering the onward advance of individuals for a great many years - too

many people have their own personal heroes that they rely upon and look to as a binding authority in spiritual matters.

To the established denomination, the leadership become sacred cows whose word cannot be questioned. Why? Because they've been there, done it, but they don't wear the tee-shirt because a suit is what's required for preaching in on Sunday mornings.

We recognise the leaders as having done the work - don't we pay them to get into the Scriptures, to study God's form and to lay out before us principles that we should be following and betting our lives on?

But that's not *their* responsibility - it's an individual believer's responsibility to seek after God Himself and to discover what it is that He would have them do.

Even outside the confines of the church meeting, we have our favourite authors, our sources of inspiration and reliability that we turn to. They've been there, too, done it but, in this case, they're actually allowed to wear the tee-shirt because they're not preaching from the pulpit but are tapping away at a computer for their Publisher's deadlines.

There's nothing wrong with finding truth and rejoicing over it, applying it and allowing God to change your life through it - but there's a whole lot wrong with accepting whatever you read or are told from the pulpit without checking it out, and even more with thinking that certain sources are so far beyond infallibility that they can be relied upon without any need to question their teaching.

We equate testing the source with questioning God but for no good reason - no one, I hope, would cook and eat a chicken that was two months over its 'use by' date simply because it was bought at Sainsburys and they've never given them food poisoning before.

Or perhaps you would?

Our adherence to authorities *regardless* is what causes errors that produce clones of believers that find it hard to change to follow after God when He at last breaks through in to their lives and speaks.

But we also have the need for shortcuts to success - just as the world does.

We live in a world where success is a pre-requisite of acceptance and it bleeds over into our spiritual walk. For, instead of graft, we go for the easy option - we rely upon the preacher or the authority.

They've done the work - it's what we pay them for - they're the ones charged with seeking God's will and telling us what God requires of us. In a world where we find less and less time to actively get to know God, it's good to know that there's someone fighting our corner on a daily basis so that we don't have to put in the effort.

But there are no shortcuts to spirituality - as a good friend of mine said to me many years ago. You *have* to work at getting to know God and the relationship you have with Him is dependant upon *you*, not on the leading elder, pastor or whatever else you call him.

It's also not reliant upon an author getting to grips with God in His own life and passing on the learning from his life and experience - if you're going to have the same walk as that author, *you* have to go through what he did and react accordingly, experience suffering, tribulation and heartaches.

Hermetically sealing yourselves inside a religiously disinfected bubble won't cause you to grow - you have to step outside the boundaries, let go and let God.

That's why an active participation in God is what He requires from us - He expects us to bet our entire lives on the insights and principles that we gain directly from Him and *not* on another person's relationship with Him.

The punter may well follow after the world's principles and mindset - but the follower of Christ should set His mind on spiritual matters and not conform to the fashions of earth.

It's strange that the punter who gets his daily fix from the Betting Office by relying on the tipster's instructions is doing nothing very much different from the follower of Christ who gets his or her instruction from a reliance upon other followers of God, rather than directly from the One they profess to be in constant communion with.

THE STORY CONTINUES...

The compilation of stories and articles contained in 'Winners and Losers' needs no additional stories adding to it as it would cause it to become disjointed - perhaps *more* disjointed than it is already as there's definitely a cut across the flow from some stories to others as I've had to retain the honesty of the feeling of the original articles and not reinterpret them in the light of some of the future experiences.

Sincerity in composition is a difficult thing to achieve when you're writing a collection of stories that are unfolding before your eyes rather than sitting at the conclusion of them all, putting them together as if they all had one and the same theme.

Yet, since the compilation finished, other racing events have taken place that have inspired me, instructed me and caused me to consider matters from a far different perspective than I would otherwise have done.

Beginning here, then, are some compositions that have come out of horse racing and which, I believe, are worth offering to the reader interested in understanding why there are no channels through which God is restricted in making His message known to men and women.



MTOTO'S PRINCE

Let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him,
and in which God has called him.
I Corinthians 7:17

The first time we stumbled across the horse Mtoto's Prince was on 11 December 2008 at Huntingdon, the third of our series of race days provided for us by God.

It was running in the final race, the two mile and half a furlong National Hunt Flat Race when they remove all the hurdles from the track so that race horses new to the game can experience a race without the hindrances of having to get across obstacles.

I can't say that I really understand why these races are so popular. I *do* understand that they give horses an introduction to racing if they're a bit green - or inept - at clearing hurdles but, to my way of thinking, it's just a long distance flat race in winter rather than it deserving to come under the 'National Hunt' title.

Indeed, the races are very often an afterthought with them being tacked on to the end of a six race card as a seventh 'extra' race when many punters have long since given up on the day and gone home, gone to the bank or gone to the pub.

Or all three.

What had struck me about the horse was its only previous run at Ascot over two miles. It hadn't done very well (finding no extra from two furlongs out) but, there in the form, someone had put almost £200 each way on it (that is, £200 for it to win and £200 for it to finish in the first three) at odds of 50/1.

One thing I couldn't accept was that this bet was from a 'normal' punter - even if science is able to prove one day that there is such an animal. It looked much more like the bet belonged to someone who'd seen or been told about the horse and who knew that the stable were expecting it to run a blinder of a race and to be there or thereabouts at the finish.

Actually, it finished tenth!

However, thinking that it may have run a little below expectations and noticing 40/1 being offered by one bookie on the track, I put a few quid on it just in case we could cover the day. It was a poor race and neither Kath nor myself fancied anything too much so three quid was a fair extra bet that kept us well within budget.

As the horses went down to the post, the price on the horse began to tumble - punters were actually causing it to come in to 10/1. When we returned home, I noticed in the race details that two bets of £100ew had been struck at 66/1 and one at 50/1 for £50ew.

No wonder the bookies were trying to put people off betting on the grey gelding because they stood to lose significant amounts if it came in first and were reluctant to accept any further liability.

I watched the horse as it ran in the pack, making significant headway to get on terms with the leaders with half a mile to go. But, then, perhaps two furlongs out, it couldn't find any extra once more and faded back in the field to finish seventh. Quite creditable, it had to be said, but it was hardly going to set the world on fire with that sort of form, being a fairly low grade race.

Curiosity got the better of me, though, and I decided to watch the horse for the next few weeks and months to see how it did. If *someone* had been supporting it to win on both occasions, it followed that the horse must be fairly well thought of and that it should only be a matter of time before it ran up to expectations.

A brief summary of its next few races will suffice - needless to say, I was watching where the horse was being declared as running, then downloading the race in the evening after the event (if it was available to view for free) to see how it fared.

On February 12, after a lay off of almost a couple of months, it was back on the track at Chepstow on heavy going and in another National Hunt Flat Race, this time over two miles and half a furlong. It did much the same as it had done in previous races - it was held up, made headway halfway through the race and, in the final few furlongs, found nothing extra, dropping back through the field and finishing eleventh of the twelve starters.

On 20 February it ran at Sandown, was held up as usual and faded in the last half mile.

On March 2 it showed perhaps its best form at Stratford when finishing fourth in a two mile and half a furlong hurdle race - its first race over obstacles - but the story was incredibly familiar. It was held up, made headway after halfway and then faded after the third fence from home, eventually losing third place to another horse who stayed the distance better.

Whatever the exact details of the race, it seemed plain to me that, although Mtoto's Prince was able to keep up at the same pace as the horses over a mile and a half, even up to a mile and three quarters at a push, it just didn't have the stamina to be able to last any further so that, when it got into the final stages of a two mile race, the horse was already saying 'That's far enough! I haven't got the puff to run any further!'

It was true that the going hadn't been particularly ideal for this type of horse. For example, if you have a horse who can last three miles and has its best runs over that distance, you wouldn't expect it to run well against speedier horses whose ideal distance is over two and a half.

However, a change in the going to soft or heavy may well sap the acceleration in the faster horses and your three mile plodder may well outstay a field of faster horses even over a shorter distance.

With this in mind, it was possible - and not beyond the realms of the imagination - that Mtoto's Prince might *just* get two miles if some of the conditions were in its favour. And they certainly seemed to be at Hereford on March 16.

For one thing, the going was good with good to firm patches - instead of sinking in soft going and having its strength sapped, reasoning told me that the horse should be able to gallop for longer before it began back-peddling. It was sunny and warm, too. And the field of horses that were lining up alongside Mtoto's Prince weren't that great - it didn't have very much to beat.

If there was any race in the world that the horse could win at a distance of two miles, this was it - and, at odds of 33/1, it was going to provide somewhat of a shock to the punter if it won.

But the story of the race was the same.

It made good progress to challenge the leading couple of horses from half a mile out but then began to fade from after the third hurdle from home, weakened after two out and eventually ended up finishing seventh of thirteen runners, although only twelve finished.

I guess I could've written the story of the race without having watched it - it was far too familiar.

Searching for a reason, for an explanation of something that doesn't make much sense can be a rewarding experience - and it was with Mtoto's Prince. It was, perhaps, one of the most rewarding investigations I've ever done on a horse.

Looking in to the breeding, it was obvious that it had a fairly good lineage for a National Hunt Horse. Its direct sire was Mtoto, a horse that had run very well over ten to twelve furlongs on the flat, although its best distance was over ten - that is, one mile two furlongs. It had been a top class flat runner during the late eighties before being retired to stud.

And Mtoto had come from Busted a generation earlier, a successful flat runner over roughly the same distance (though the form reports indicate that it did fairly well at a mile and a half, too).

On Mtoto's Prince's dam's side, it's grandsire was the very classy Kris, a champion miler in its day, although it seems to have been successful over one mile two furlongs as well.

My eyes also spotted that the horse had a half-brother currently in training called Parthenope who was a winner over a mile at Doncaster in August 2008 and over seven furlongs in a race in Germany.

If there was one thing that was starting to ring alarm bells in my ears it was this - why would anyone expect Mtoto's Prince to stay two miles? Were they nuts?

The pedigree shouted 'Not more than a mile and a half' - and, from what I'd seen as I'd watched it run these past three months, I couldn't help but affirm the pedigree as being right.

This horse was never bred to last two miles - every time it was being put onto a National Hunt track and asked to run the minimum distance of two miles, it was always going to fail.

It was an inevitability.

And that sort of thing always gets me thinking.

Why do believers in Christ think they can ignore their spiritual breeding?

I don't mean denominational background or traditional upbringing - those sorts of considerations are not from God and should be disregarded totally.

No, when a person first comes to acknowledge Jesus, to place their trust in the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ as being all-sufficient for them to be made right before God, they are *birthed* into the Church by the Holy Spirit.

It's a supernatural act performed by God and should never be thought of as an inevitable consequence of a verbal formula (as many denominations and believers have done - and still do, even today).

But, if birthed, we have a pedigree that we would expect to see both achieved and fulfilled *and* to stand as a limiting factor to the extent of the success we're likely to reach.

For God knows *how* we're birthed, *why* we're gifted the way we are - not enhancing the natural but imparting a commission supernaturally that we should discover is as much a part of our life as breathing is.

The trouble is that we forget to think about the pedigree and tend to rush in like fools in to many a situation or 'work' that doesn't fulfil our potential - it's not why we were born, it isn't part of the pedigree that was given to us when we first believed.

Like Mtoto's Prince, we strive to run in two milers when we will never last more than a mile and a half. We admire Everest and try to conquer it in the name of YHWH but we neglect to realise that we were bred to ply our trade on the seas.

If we would but keep to the breeding, we would find that God would move through us in the measure to which He first assigned us, rather than to strive after something we will never achieve and which will, ultimately, never cause us to reach our Divine target of fulfilling the calling.

The day after writing the above article, I decided to go public and tried to contact the trainer of Mtoto's Prince to pass on the information.

Mrs Thorpe wasn't initially easy to find with one web site holding an out-of-service number for her - however, eventually I found the real number of her operations in Bronwydd Arms (that's a real place, by the way, and not the name of a pub) in Wales and dialled the number.

A very sleepy female voice answered the phone - well, it was only ten o'clock on a Sunday morning so, perhaps, she was trying to grab a lie in like a lot of the rest of the world.

Having established that it was, indeed, Mrs Thorpe that I was talking to, that she was the trainer of Mtoto's Prince and that she didn't mind having a chat about the horse (perhaps she thought I might be wanting to buy the animal?), I proceeded to relate what I have above (although without the spiritual application), concluding by saying that I thought the horse could chalk up a series of wins on the flat between one mile two furlongs and one and a half miles in low grade company *because all the evidence* (the form and the breeding) seemed to point towards that conclusion.

To her credit, I must say, she didn't treat me as a crank and even laughed when I said 'I bet you don't get many phone calls like this, do you?' and she was quite frank in admitting that she hadn't thought about a flat race with the horse.

I told her that what she did with the horse was quite obviously between herself and the owners but that I had just wanted to feedback my observations so that they could be discussed.

Again, to her credit, I think that's what she will indeed do.

It may seem strange to the reader that I was so bold as to declare what I felt to be right - but a believer who senses something is a certain way and who keeps quiet (I'm talking of spiritual matters now and don't mean to be urging believers to ring horse trainers up with their observations) cannot venture to take the 'credit' when what they believe to be the case comes about.

If we've no guts to risk words that may prove to be wrong, we don't have the right to put our hand up and say 'I knew that was the case' when situations turn out the way we 'felt' they would.

The decision as to what to do with the horse remains with the trainer and owners, of course.

They may - after having considered the suggestion - decide that Mtoto's Prince is too slow to be a one and a half mile horse. That's their choice entirely - but, if they decide to go with the suggestion after having looked at the horse itself and its suitability, and if it runs as well as its pedigree suggests, they may have a significantly successful horse that has been transformed from loser to winner by a simple 'change of plan' in which they play to its strengths rather than to their own hopes and ambitions.



DEFYING BELIEF

You believe that God is one; you do well.
Even the demons believe...
James 2:19

I want to write a few words about a specific type of punter that, as far as I know, defies a specific label. Punters range in characteristic from the obsessive compulsive who throws money at anything and everything on which odds are offered, to the punter who picks his or her races out to bet on; from the person who may have a bet two or three times a year (notably on the Grand National, the Derby and on one other special occasion that they deem appropriate), to the professional gambler who tries to make a living at the game.

When you say 'punter' to the average man in the street, they may conjure up a specific type of person and a specific type of betting pattern associated with them but it's like thinking that one christian is the same as any other or one pigeon-fancier, one mountain climber or...

...well, you get my point.

To the believer in Christ, I'm totally convinced that, because gambling has never been fully understood by them and how the subject is just as much an integral part of their own lives as it is a part of the punter (see my previous articles), they assume that all punters are inherently evil, in a secret pact with the devil and there's nothing on earth that would ever convince them otherwise.

But the specific type of punter I have in mind has a great amount to teach the Church and, in fact, may actually have more to call the Church to account for than believers would really care to acknowledge.

There's a type of punter, then, who I'd call discerning - they may not show a profit at the end of the day but that's hardly the reason why they'll occasionally have a bet on a horse or on the outcome of a football match.

For them, it's more about the enjoyment of the event than it is about winning, it's about assessing a situation, coming to a conclusion and then backing up that conclusion with some money.

They may have a bet only three or four times a year - or once a month or once a week - but they're not the kind of person who will look through a list of runners and riders and choose a horse because it has a pretty name, the jockey is wearing their favourite colour or because they simply *have* to have a bet because they've got money to lose.

Indeed, sometimes, a bet on a race for this kind of punter may have started many weeks and months before as they watch horses run a series of races and they try to come to terms with the ideal conditions that will enhance the chance of that particular equine.

They're equally at home punting on a seller at Sedgefield as they are shedding a few pounds on the Champion Hurdle at Cheltenham.

For them, then, it's about conviction.

When this punter comes to a particularly settled conclusion about a race, it becomes, for them, a matter of how deep their belief is as to what they'll do next. It may not even be a case of how much money they want to win from the race but, rather, a matter of backing up their belief by investing and risking a part of their life on the outcome - for that is exactly what they're doing.

They may turn their back on the race, thinking that their particular conclusion is uncertain or doubtful - and they won't worry if they don't have a bet on the race *or* if their very unsure selection actually wins. Rather, they'll learn something from the outcome and try to apply it at a later date.

But, when they feel certain about an outcome, they feel compelled to put part of their life on the line to back up their belief.

That's when their belief actually becomes faith - that is, belief with legs (not four legs, just legs) - for faith is nothing if it's not active and it's always thinking about how a life might be employed to show by actions what belief is.

So, for example - and to try and give a totally different type of situation for you to consider - I may say to you that I believe that the medicine in the bottle that sits on the shelf above my bathroom sink will cure my indigestion. You may believe it, too. It may have even been scientifically proven to cure indigestion in seventy-five per cent of cases in a recent clinical test - but none of this is faith.

Faith is active when I get off my butt and go and take the appropriate dose. Until such time as I do that, my belief is simply a conviction that lacks any real substance.

Similarly, I may say to you that leaving money in banks is an insecure and dangerous thing to do in the current economic climate when there are safer alternatives. Now, unless I give that belief legs and take out my money and put it into those safer alternatives, my belief doesn't become faith.

I may tell you - when the banks fold in one day of economic meltdown and I lose everything I had with them - that I knew it was an inevitability *but* it would only go to show that I lacked any real faith in my belief and was unwilling to risk part of my life in support of what I said I believed.

So it is with this type of punter.

For them, the investment of part of their life - that is, by them going to place some money on their selection - is actually belief in action or 'faith'. It's about accepting that conviction is futile unless the life that bears it is unwilling to apply it.

A gamble, then, for this type of punter, is a concluding act of faith.

In the Church, I wish we'd grasped the same truth - and applied it.

I wish that we believed it and had faith in it!

For there are a great many believers but very few 'faithers' (there, I've coined a new word). We think that belief in a series of propositions and statements is enough to save us - we believe that passivity of life is acceptable when it comes to the bold and blatant demands of God and the Gospel upon those who profess to believe.

And it ain't. It's worthless.

In fact, on the Last Day, the punter described above will probably rise up to condemn us for our lack of real faith when, if they had ever been converted, they would have invested their lives in their belief - as they had already been doing when they bet on the outcome of races.

We may say that we believe that the Gospel is the only true message of salvation for the world, but what percentage of our resources are we actually using to back that belief up - that is, how much faith do we have?

I don't mean that we should take money that we need (note the word - 'need') and use it to advance the Gospel (although some have even done this), but how much have we actually taken from our surplus to demonstrate the faith we have in our belief?

And where is the demonstration of our faith with our lives?

Quite rightly, God doesn't object to us having hobbies and interests - indeed, they're very often the way we reach out to others and allow God to speak to us in ways that others need to hear - but when the sum total of our free time becomes a demonstration of them rather than a declaration of our faith in our relationship with God and the message of the Gospel, we really must wake up to the fact that, perhaps, we don't really have any faith.

It's just belief.

And belief without legs is worthless.



WAR OF ATTRITION

If you've read the other articles in the 'Winners and Loses' series (the exact circumstances of what follows has been edited out of the Abridged version of this work), you'll have noticed that we decided to put some excess and unneeded money on War of Attrition in Ireland over the Christmas period - and that the horse duly obliged us by finishing only second behind Exotic Dancer.

War of Attrition was a top class Chaser two seasons prior to Denman winning the Gold Cup in March 2008 and is now on the 'come back' trail after a lengthy injury. Just how far the horse 'comes back' remains to be seen and, from the reports I've read, it was withdrawn from the 2009 Gold Cup at Cheltenham to aim it at the Grand National at Aintree in the Spring.

Following horses to see how they fare, to sometimes stand amazed at where the trainers place them and to watch them go from bad to brilliant and back to appalling again is quite an interesting thing to do - and War of Attrition was a horse that we felt would have its 'big year' during this season *if* it had managed to shrug off the effects of the injury.

So, odds of 33/1 in the Grand National at Aintree looked rather intriguing - not that I can remember ever having a bet in the National in the past ten years, even though I was convinced one morning of the race that Silver Birch would run well and joked with Kath that we should go and put a fiver each way on it.

It duly obliged at 33/1 but we didn't have so much as a nickel on it and I roared with laughter when it cantered home, saying to Kath 'Why didn't you put the bet on?' which was greeted with appropriate derision and ridicule.

I guess that, if there was any horse that we would have had a bet on for the 2009 Grand National, it would've been War of Attrition.

On 21 March 2009 on the News of the World website (the article appeared in the 22 March edition of the paper), Alastair Down wrote an article headed 'War of Attrition with Bookies - Mop up the 33/1 offered on the Grand National'.

We didn't see the article and were only directed to it on the Monday afternoon (23 March 2009) after the price on the horse had taken a nose dive steeper than a kamikaze pilot.

Flicking back to the newspaper's web site to summon up the article, it was fairly obvious now just what had sparked such a betting frenzy on the horse in the past thirty-six hours. For one of the top horse racing journalists had written about War of Attrition that

'He is simply overpriced and cannot go off at more than half that price [that is, 16/1]...He has been given a real chance by the British handicapper, so much so that the Irish handicapper has been heard making noises that War Of Attrition is a very well-treated horse at Aintree. What is more he is still only nine years old, very much a prime-of-life age for a staying chaser, and class horses of his ilk have a tremendous record in the Grand National. He jumps soundly, is a thorough stayer and wily trainer Mouse Morris is a master at priming his horses for the big race'

It sounded like he had simply to turn up at the post and all the other rivals would lift their hooves up and say 'No way! I'm not running against *him* - I haven't a chance!'

Concluding his article, he observed that

'...now is the time to have a punt and get a class act on our side as he looks a 16/1 shot top-offer to me on the day'

At the time of writing this, the horse's price has slumped to a best-priced 20/1, with the majority of the top bookies having cut it in to 16/1 in the space of two full days of trading.

Gosh. It looks like Alastair Down was right!

Or was he?

Actually, it's one of those strange scenarios where it was only because someone respected said that the price should be 16/1 that the gambling world decided that they had to get on quickly to take the price because it would be shorter on the day of the race.

They may not have fancied the horse at all.

They may have their own fancies for who will win the Grand National.

But when a top journalist announces that the price is far too big and should be shorter, it seems as if the world is convinced and sets about making it happen.

So, War of Attrition will probably be not more than 16/1 on the day of the race. Because that price represents its chance in the race?

No, not at all. It's because a respected authority says that it won't be bigger and punters are making the prophecy happen.

I also believe that a similar phenomenon is taking place in the TV Soaps although, for quite a long time, I was none too sure what was cause and what was effect.

It's fairly often that I catch the last five minutes of a Soap when I'm tuning in to watch a programme that starts afterwards or when I'm channel hopping and my finger grows weary on the remote control (that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it).

I struggled for a long time wondering whether TV Soaps accurately portrayed true-to-life events and people because they mimicked what the writers read in the newspapers or whether - and this is probably more scary - they were changing society to behave in the manner in which they were portraying life.

It was strange because, although I could vaguely recall news snippets that seemed to mirror the stories being acted out on the screen, I would also see parallels in the stories that were 'new' both days and weeks afterwards.

In the end - and without any definitive proof to back it up - I had to conclude that, although a Soap writer may take inspiration from the way society acts, applying it in to the plot of the long running saga on television, they would normally take more of the unique and rare items of news to insert into the programme because it was 'new' to the viewing public.

However, it no longer remained either rare or unique after the programme, for men and women seemed to want to go out in to the world and duplicate the things they'd watched their favourite characters do.

In other words, instead of being simply a reflection of society or of being the prompt that changes society from one state to another - both of which, I believe, are incorrect by the narrowness of their position - it seems to me that TV Soaps act like catalysts within the lives of the viewers to multiply the behaviour that's being portrayed.

It would be nice to be able to do some research on the matter and look at the incidents of crimes and misdemeanours both before broadcasts and afterwards, but such a thing is probably not possible.

If the theory is right, though, if you want to see the traits in which a society will predominate in the future, you need do not much more than turn on the television and watch a prophetic insight into the world of societal degeneration.

Because we accept it, we become it.

Because we find nothing wrong with such behaviour, we make it happen.

And, because we admire our heroes, we adopt their actions.

When Abram was given a promise from God that his own son would become his heir when he was more advanced in years than most of us are and when his wife was considered beyond the age to produce offspring, he had a difficult decision to make.

He probably had more than one, if I'm honest, but, generally speaking, we tend to tie it down to a simple choice of two actions

Should he wait for God to make the event happen by His own will and power - or was the prophecy a prompt for him to use any means possible to make it happen?

In the scenario presented above with War of Attrition, the answer would be simple - an authority on these types of matters had spoken so that the concluding outcome was an inevitability.

Best get on with the job and make the kid happen - Sara, it's your lucky night tonight.

But what action would the TV Soap prompt us to do? Very much the same. Sex is the only action needed, so you might as well get laid sooner rather than later to produce the child - let's open the door wide to promiscuity, immorality, unfaithfulness and adultery (all common characteristics of your average Soap and, more poignantly, probably all pretty common in the society of Abram's day, too).

In one sense, we shouldn't see Abram as being disobedient to the Word and Promise of God - rather, we should see him as being obedient to the traits and characteristics in which he lived. God certainly doesn't wipe out Ishmael as a mistake or judge Abram because of disobedience - but the natural consequence of his action was pretty large.

Making something happen has not only ripple affects but outcomes that rival the fiercest tsunami - and all because we try to make God act on our behalf through the outcome of our own actions rather than stand back and let Him.

I also wonder just how often we rip 'promises' from the Bible as if they're active and living messages to us in our present experience - regardless of whether the Holy Spirit is actually upon the words, empowering them for our circumstance - and then, taking the message, we step out 'in faith' (for 'faith' read 'presumption') and try to make it happen, gleaning only a limited success in the things we achieve.

A fulfilment begins with a promise, a wedding begins with an engagement and a successful conclusion to a

spiritual life begins with standing back and allowing God to be everything to us for no better reason than He must lead and not be led.

I've written in a previous article that there's a need to have legs with belief so that it births faith - but the obverse of the same coin is one that sees the receipt of a promise impossible to fulfil without Divine intervention.

Sure, Abram could've started buying baby clothes, had a carpenter make a crib and made sure he was aware of the location of a midwife for when the time was to come. That would've been faith. He could've also demonstrated 'belief with legs' by continuing to have sexual intercourse with Sara - at her age and in her condition that may well have been not just faith but overcoming a natural tendency for abstinence and nausea in the face of a wrinkly prune of a wife *but* it would still have been faith.

But *make* the kid happen by applying the promise to a situation that wasn't God's way? Well, that wasn't faith - that was presumption.

And the same is true today - we shouldn't take promises and try to *make* God move in them. If we have a promise, we must *let* God move, give Him space and, by faith, live in readiness.

But never - *never* - presume upon fulfilling a promise in our own strength.

Sooner or later, our own actions are going to turn back on us, jump up and bite us on the bum.

By the way - and this is written truthfully and, in many respects, ironically - over a week before The Grand National 2009, War of Attrition was declared to be a non-runner, the Trainer being quoted as saying that

'We weren't 100 per cent happy with War Of Attrition this morning and we've decided against sending him to Aintree'

So, what happens to all that money that poured on him at Alastair Down's insistence? It's lost - to the punter, that is. The vast sums of money that brought the price tumbling to a best priced 14/1 on the day of its withdrawal goes towards the upkeep of the Bookmaking firms.

The action that attempted to make something happen, actually achieved nothing - except, of course, to make the participator *poorer*.

Assumed and unfulfilled prophecy has a habit of doing that - it robs the believer of spiritual riches and undermines their faith in real future promises that *need* action to give them legs.



COMPULSION

Picture the scene if you will.

This punter has been putting on the same bet at the same track everyday they hold a meeting for the past year - if you want to know the exact bet then it has to do with greyhounds and forecasting the first two dogs in the correct order, but that's not important. The way he bets, if a couple of selections come in, he could win a few hundred - if three or four, he could win thousands.

But, so far, despite being extremely close a few times, he's got nothing.

What does he do the next time the meeting is on?

Well, he can't risk *not* putting the bet on because - as even believers would understand - the one day you don't do something is normally the very same day when the action would have been necessary!

The punter, therefore, is committed to serving the method and even fears not doing it because he knows that, sooner or later, his commitment will pay off. He wouldn't dream of missing a day and, if ever he's too far away from the Betting Shop to get the bet on, his insides will be convulsed with incriminations, guilt, anxiety and the conviction that the bet would return thousands if only he could find a way to get on.

He may also believe that, if it does come up, the Betting Office staff will find a way to void the bet and return him the stake only - but that's another fear that we need not go in to here!

The same is true of the lottery - sooner or later, the six numbers you've chosen (your grandmother's year of birth, your grandfather's inside leg measurement, your own year of birth, your daughter's weight in pounds at birth, the amount of times your wife nags you the day before you go to make the bet on the lottery [the only variable number and something that requires close attention to measure it accurately] and the weight in grams that you feed your fish in the pond each day) are going to come up.

It stands to reason - an infinite number of monkeys banging away at an infinite number of typewriters are, sooner or later, going to come up with the six Lottery numbers. Or does the original analogy end with the Complete Works of Shakespeare as its conclusion?

But the punter can't risk *not* putting it on. He knows - as only he can - that to risk the balls falling in place when he's not on is far worse than staking the money twice a week and losing.

He *has* to bet on the numbers - he's staking his life on it that, in the not too distant future, the improbable will become history.

Such is the compulsion that a punter feels on occasions that any attempt at reason will prove futile - you can't argue with the punter that the bet is stacked in the bookies' favour because that unhealthy fear that gnaws at the flesh within is always going to overcome *any* sound reason or argument that urges him to be rational.

What a poor lot that sits in the punter's lap! So bound into a course of action that he can never be free to break loose from the shackles that are holding him captive and walk in a freedom that allows him to make different decisions and choose different actions with no worry about the consequences of not carrying out habits.

If this was an article designed simply to bewail the plight of the punter and of their need to be set free by God into the 'glorious liberty of the sons of God', I'd be quite happy to hang up my pen now, having felt that I'd made my point sufficiently well. All that would remain would be to bring the matter to a conclusion, add some words of wisdom and encouragement to the bound and raise up the life of the believer in Christ as being an example to the world.

If only.

The problem is that the believer is very often in the exact same situation that the punter finds himself in.

Most denominations have methodology and traditions that have become so entrenched in their corporate expressions that they've taken the place of God's presence and can no longer be abandoned for something new because there's a compulsion to continue to practice them and a fear that, if they're not lived out, God will turn His face away from them and something really nasty will happen (like the house where they meet will burn down. In fact, sometimes the house where they meet will burn down *because* they continue to do the same old things they've always done and God's trying to wake them up to do something different. The insurance usually covers the cost of rebuilding the place, however, and the congregation are only hindered for around a year from carrying out spontaneously what they've done every week for the past century).

They *have* to celebrate communion in a certain way, they *have* to sing hymns (or choruses), they *have* to meet on a Sunday, the appointed leader *has* to stand at the front, the sermon *has* to be at least half an hour long...

...there's no end to it.

Traditions are normally the fossilised remains of something that was very much alive at one time before God's life moved on in to something new and His people forgot to follow Him, finding a warm fuzzy feeling in the comfortable security of the predictable that they normally call 'the presence of God'.

Just as worrying, though, are the individuals who, claiming to be free, are as bound up as any punter.

They *believed* God said something to them at one point and now they mustn't do anything other than what they were last told. In one sense, if God really *has* told them to do something, they should certainly get on with it but, in my experience, it's normally not God at all that's spoken to them.

Why am I so sure?

Because they're bound into a behavioural trait that's stopping them moving on to know more of God - they're valiantly upholding their lifestyle as being a reflection of God's will and condemning all those who are living in contradiction to it.

So, for example, the daily wine drinker condemns the teetotaler who, likewise, condemns the weekly beer drinker who wonders at the abstainer for being so bound. Neither can accept the other's lifestyle for fear of condemning their own - worse, they're so compelled to do as they've been doing for fear of denying the life they're 'free to live', that they're no longer free before God, but restricting what He's doing in their midst.

The punter fears that they must continue to place the same bets for fear that something bad will happen - the believer is bound to do the same. And both are living lives of fear before a God who expects us to receive His perfect love that it may cast out fear and set us free to serve Him as He chooses, morally upright but with no pre-conceived ideas or pre-determined agendas that we'd use to replace an experience of His presence.

Tell a believer that what he *thinks* he's doing for God is actually something he's doing for Himself and you'll be labelled an instrument of satan - just as the punter wouldn't be open to reason, so the believer, bound into ways of life that are against the moving of God (but with words and statements that sound incredibly holy), would react negatively against the exhortation to forsake their former ways and to experience the new.

Worse than this, when the Pharisees first saw Jesus casting out demons, healing the sick and setting men and women free from what was binding them *using methods and words that were against the lives and beliefs that they were living as God's people*, they decided conclusively that Jesus was nothing less than a channel of demonic expression, a vehicle sent by satan to oppose the work of God of which they were faithful ministers.

Today's believer is no different and we should be careful to realise that it wasn't the secular, the pagan or the unbeliever that stood before God as not being able to be forgiven for equating a move of God with satan but, rather, the 'believing church', the leaders of God's people, the men and women who had been faithful to the Law and to the ways of life that had come about from a contemplation and meditation on the statutes given to them through Moses.

Fear grips the believer just as it grips the punter - except it's not a fear that's a reverence for God. Rather, it's a fear that's binding God's people into beliefs and lifestyles that are refusing them entry into the fulness of the liberty of the children of God.



RELIABILITY

For us, having an occasional bet on the horses has *never* been about making money - to think that you could ever achieve such a thing, long term, would be a foolish premise on which to base a decision.

The odds are stacked against you.

Besides, the basis of following Christ is to 'spend and be spent' for the sake of the Gospel, something that it would be nice if believers would take to heart and so make themselves *poor* rather than continually rejoice that they're getting richer as time progresses and that they have more disposable income *for themselves*.

No, having an occasional bet is simply the final act in a series of events that we go through when we start studying races or watching horses run (and we have one or two favourites that we like to see where they're running to see how they fare, regardless of whether we have a punt on them).

We don't decide that we want a bet and chose a random race on which to place some money. Neither do we look at the food in the cupboard and decide we need to win seventy or eighty pounds for the weekly shop.

Having a bet is not a necessity of life - you aren't less of a human being if you don't have a bet or more like one if you do. It doesn't mean that you can survive longer on this earth whichever option you take and it is, very simply, an individual choice that's made.

On *this* basis, it's a bit like a person who drinks Coke rather than water, or tea, coffee or any other beverage with which you hydrate the body. It's purely a matter of choice and preference.

As far as I'm aware, it's a very small minority who *can't* drink water and who need an alternative. For the majority of us, taking tea is simply a choice, perhaps because we find water bland, because we don't like coffee or because our teeth dissolve with Coke.

Our lives are full of things we do because we enjoy doing them but which don't keep us alive or promote our deaths. Perhaps I *should* say our *Western* lives, for many in less well off societies have less choices than the affluent people we've become.

When it comes to the investment of our time and resources (which, to us, usually means our money), we have choices that we're responsible for.

I've always found it interesting that holidays aren't mentioned in the Bible and yet we seem to think that they're a right we have - an assumption that we're justified in spending amounts of money on 'getaways' over the course of a year that never needs to be questioned or called to account. Likewise, the changing of our automobiles when we see another we like or want.

We lose thousands of pounds each year in the choices we make instead of investing the money wisely to get ourselves substantial *spiritual* returns and so further advance the Gospel through.

When it comes to having a bet on the horses, I'm the first to admit that treating it as an investment is more risky than, say, investing in the Stock Market (although from the evidence of the last few years, that statement may need some revision) or setting up a bank account that accrues interest, and that such an action should be used only and ever as an experience or irregular pastime.

Even so, for believers, it's best that they stay well away from these sorts of investments as I've said elsewhere.

When it comes down to the believer wishing to invest for the future (and, by that, I *don't* mean investing money in something to gain *more* money but in providing for ministries where there are no other means of provision), it has to be on the basis of reliability - just as it is in the world of gambling (although, for us - I must repeat myself here - we aren't looking for a reliable animal on which to make money because that's not the reason we occasionally have a bet).

Reliability, then, is always the issue.

Let me give you an example from the world of horse racing that happened just recently.

On it's preparatory race before the great Cheltenham Festival of 2010, one of the leading horses in the Cheltenham Gold Cup, Denman, lined up against five rivals who, if truth be told, were probably only thinking about place prize money rather than being first at the Winning Post.

So much superior was the horse to the others that the Bookies offered it at odds of one to seven - for those of you unfamiliar with such a statement, it meant that, if you put seven pounds on the horse to win, the bookie would put up just the one pound to match it and the winner would take the eight that was 'in the pot'. Put seventy thousand pounds on and you stood to make a profit on the deal of just ten thousand pounds.

That may sound like dreadful odds but it does represent a 14% return on your investment over the course of six minutes. At the current bank interest rates, seventy thousand pounds would return you only about 2% over an entire year and, if my maths is right, the relative differences between the two rates is something approaching infinity and too big a number even to contemplate.

But, of course, the horse is a high-risk investment and, because of that, it has a high reward attached to it. It's the same with the Stock Market - the more risky the share, the greater the potential reward, but I'd be surprised if ever it was able to offer anyone a 14% return for just a six minute investment.

I will probably be proved wrong, of course. But, back to my story.

Everything was going well in the race with just over half a mile to go. Denman had been cruising throughout and jumping the fences with such confidence that it was gaining a length or more over its rivals at nearly every one it encountered.

Soaring over the cross fence, it cantered into a three length advantage as they prepared to turn in to the straight for the final time.

But there were a few alarm bells starting to ring in the jockey's head for, when asked to quicken and stretch away from the field, it's nearest challenger, Niche Market, started to gain.

Four from home, with the rival starting to get back on terms, Denman made such a horlicks of the fence that it screwed on landing and veered alarmingly towards the rail before the jockey, balanced perfectly to stay on board, picked the horse up and pushed on to try and get back in to the race.

There was still plenty of time to do just that and, by the time they approached three out, Denman was travelling at the same pace and, with a half decent jump, would have a couple of furlongs to overhaul the leader to win.

But the third from home at Newbury is an open ditch - a standard fence that lies stretched across the track after a rail and a dip in the ground, causing the horses to have to take off and jump *across* more than simply up.

Asking the horse for a good jump, Denman took off way too early (almost in the previous race) and landed on and in the brushwood, pushing the fence in front of it like a JCB demolishing a brick wall.

With absolutely no chance whatsoever to stay on, the jockey fell out the side while the horse stayed on its feet and went on to complete the race.

So much for a sure fire 14% six minute investment (the starting price of the horse was eventually declared at one to six, an 18% investment but, generally, one to seven is what you would have been presented with).

Incidentally - and I say this only as an aside - when Niche Market's jockey saw Denman make such a bad error at the third last, he pushed his mount on to put as much distance between himself and the horse as possible, to give its opponent little chance of regaining the ground.

It was, however, the one act that probably lost it the race for, tying up over the last having used up all its reserves to push on, Tricky Trickster clawed the deficit back to win by a short head at odds of eight to one (an 800% investment over six minutes!).

What seemed like a quick fire return proved to be a loss, what seemed to be a sound investment for the future turned into, in hindsight, a bad risk.

Whether it be Stock Market investments, horse racing, deposit accounts with banks, Premium Bonds, better paid job positions - or anything else - one can only weigh up the signs, consider the possibilities and then underpin your decision or assessment with your money and time.

Everything is done - or, should be done - on the basis of the perceived reliability.

That's what's always been a major problem for my wife and I when we've attempted to assess where our investments should be in the Church for, although *everything* invested in should have the reliability of the believers themselves as the foundation stone of the resource, it normally becomes such a problem that reliability is the one thing that we *can't* rely on.

Tautologically, we can rely on unreliability.

We've always worked on the basis of putting aside ten per cent of our income to invest in the promotion of the Gospel - it's not a legal obligation as some would maintain, for the Bible is quite plain that the 'law' was given under the Old Covenant, fulfilled in Christ, and that there's now freedom to serve rather than an obligation to live under a set of rules.

Nevertheless, we find that doing such a thing is a good discipline and makes sure that we have money to invest in the Church *at the beginning* rather than as an after thought after we've done all we want to do with our money.

Sermon over.

It means that we can sometimes build up money that we can invest in more major projects in order to get a return *for the Kingdom*. Not for ourselves for, if we were to get more money back from something we'd invested in, we wouldn't regard it as ours but as more to reinvest elsewhere.

But, from our past experience, reliability has often been the problem.

For example, over the course of two or three years (I can't remember which) we supported a foreign believer going through Bible College so he could return to his own country to take up a position in the local

church (we would, rather, that believers accept one another for the ministries they have regardless of qualifications but we have to be practical and realise that believers don't often live out the teachings of the Bible even though they say they believe them).

We had no problem with that but, towards the end of his time here, he contacted us because he'd run out of money and needed a few hundred before his return home. I questioned him at length about whether he had any assets he could sell to raise the capital (after all, a man should provide for himself and not make himself a burden on others) but, no, it was simply a matter of providing some cash to see him through the last two months.

However, after he'd returned home, we discovered that he'd left his car with a friend to sell and to forward on to him the money! In other words, he decided to hide an asset to gain an advantage over us to part with some of God's money (for that's how we view that fund).

Another couple we know decided to go to a College for believers (I hesitate calling it a 'Bible College' because it isn't like that at all) *because they had the financial resources to be able to*, having large amounts of money behind them from their investments (probably *not* from horse racing) and previous employment.

Within the first six months, they were contacting all their friends asking for support - instead of putting their hands into their own pocket, they wanted to leech off fellow believers.

Jesus came and made himself poor in order that others would become rich, leaving us an example that we should make ourselves poor in order to enrich the lives of others. Quite obviously, we decided that such an investment was not to be entered in to, that they were going to go through the course regardless of our investment *because they already had the resource*.

Another couple we knew to be in financial difficulty - they'd written off two successive cars and had been unable to replace it, and the husband's guitar that had been swallowed by a firm going bankrupt had also not been able to be replaced - so we asked the husband to come round for a chat.

Yes, they *were* in difficulty (though their income was, we estimated, twice that of ours). They had debts that were taking money just to maintain the level of the debt - my wife and I call that 'dead money' - and were about to use a CCard loan to replace the car, probably one of the worse ways to borrow money as the interest rates were so high.

We offered them a *loan*, not a gift - for reasons that I won't go in to here - at 0% interest. It was simply a 'pay us back when you can' arrangement where the risks were all ours (as there would be no agreement, no witnessed arrangement and they could quite easily have said 'we never borrowed anything', effectively stealing the money from us - or, rather, from God).

He went away to 'think about it' (what exactly was there to think about?) and that was the last we ever heard from them about the arrangement. We were never able to invest in them to get them back on to their feet.

We also once invested in a Church organisation when they asked us to because, they said, we were being 'disobedient' (I was much younger then and not so outspoken as I am today. If it happened now I would probably laugh out loud and leave) - and then found that our money was simply being swallowed up in administrative costs rather than the advance of the Gospel. It taught us *never* to do that again, *ever*.

We tried to invest in a project in a Third World country, to pay specifically for wells in one area but the christian organisation wanted us simply to give them money without any accountability.

We sent money to be given to people in a church group in a poverty-stricken country of the world, to people who were in a dire financial situation because of their relationship with Jesus, only to find that, three months after the gift, the money was still sitting in a Western bank account ('You don't need food just yet, you haven't suffered enough').

We would even (and this has nothing to do with our 'tithe investments') have moved over our banking to a certain institution who kept advertising on the television that they don't knowingly invest in any oppressive regimes in the world, promoting themselves as being the *ethical* alternative to investment.

I decided to check it out but, despite numerous calls to the helpline and a couple of letters, they refused to give me a list of the countries that they considered to be 'unoppressive' that they were currently investing in so that we could be assured where our money was being used.

It seems it was only an advertising campaign with no real substance behind it - at the least, no substance that they wanted to make public.

You may be asking yourself whether my wife and I have ever benefited from monetary gifts in the past and the answer would be a most definite 'yes'. In fact, in the early years of being a believer when I was moving round England with a particular denomination, I relied on people in the fellowships - rather than the organisation itself - to supply my needs.

It's called 'living by faith' amongst the hierarchy of denominations because it means they don't have to provide for their servants and can, with Biblical justification, use a lack of resource as evidence of someone being

out of God's will.

It got me into the mindset of *looking* for money from people, something that always appalled me and, in a few cases, I was actually horrified that support came from the people of churches who were poor while the rich went about their business as they'd always done.

Since the web site has been in existence, I have only been offered money *once* by a believer - and he was in Brazil, so he said - to maintain the site (or perhaps it was for my own personal use?) and, as we were self-sufficient and in no need of money, I said that, while I wouldn't refuse any gift, I would rather that he found local ministries that were in need of support and invest in them.

That was the last I heard of him.

But, receiving provision from others is always more of a concern for me because I know, at the present time, I'm not in need of the resource to live. If someone were to give me a thousand pounds, I'd have the problem of trying to know what I'm supposed to do with it.

Having too much money actually frightens me - and having too much 'tithe' also perplexes me because, as far as I'm concerned, it's money sitting around doing nothing for the Kingdom.

But finding a worthwhile person in which to invest it is difficult.

Reliability here is the underlying issue in one form or another.

Do the people we invest the money in represent a reliable vessel to advance the Kingdom *that would not have taken place had we not put our hands into our pockets?*

In the case of the foreign Bible student, our investment did nothing except save him from using his own resources - just as would have been the case had we given money in support of the couple who had large resources of their own.

Our investment in the Third World church was let down by the unreliability of those who had the care and welfare for them by their slothfulness at getting the resource out. Even when we were willing to invest in a couple to help them get their resources back on track (to remove 'dead money' that could be used elsewhere), they seemed to have chosen to keep on going their own way rather than take the route of escape to provide better for the Church in the future ('Oh God, supply our needs, *but not through them!*').

All we could rely on them to do, it appeared to us, was to use the world's debt systems to get themselves into more debt!

So, if you were to ask me whether a tenner investment on a horse (although, as I've previously stated, we don't use horses as investments) is evil, I would have to point out that, in our own experience, investing in the Church to further promote the Gospel has probably less chance of success than if Denman had stood up at Newbury and gone on to win at odds of one to seven.

If only investing in believers was reliable!

If only the believer, upon receiving a monetary gift, stood in fear of using it unwisely and thought about optimum use.

When it comes to reliability of investment within the Church, then, I despair.



LOSING AND WINNING

The punter who gambles his money on a losing selection will - generally speaking - do one of two things. He will either continue on regardless of the loss and have future bets - whether from time to time as he has always done, or from race to race - or he'll chase his losses.

The former of these two is by far the most sensible, by far the most stable - for he shows that his betting 'habit' (for want of a better word) isn't influenced by circumstances and will remain fairly constant.

The latter, however, lives in a dangerous place for, having lost, say, a tenner, he looks to the next race to recover not only his new stake but also the money that he's just lost.

That might not be such a big deal in the second race but, give that punter a six race card and allow for the possibility (a very real possibility) that he may have gambled on five dead certs (the operative word being 'dead', here), the money that he could invest on race six might be fairly astronomical compared to what he had originally been planning to invest before the start of racing.

Such a punter is likely both to win and lose large fortunes - although the latter of these two possibilities is by far the most common, livelihoods, jobs and possessions being at severe risk from this mindset.

I have already equated the believer's experience to a gamble in previous articles - especially where belief doesn't become faith until something of the person who possesses the 'belief' becomes supportive of the position so that it costs them something.

Eh?

In simpler terms, such is the nature of faith that, unless you're willing to put something on the line that could end up in personal loss, your belief will stay with you and won't do you any good.

When it comes to the situation of a losing gamble for the believer - that is, when they put their time and resources into their belief *and the end result is a loss, a failure* - matters are a whole lot different.

It would be nice to think that the most common result would be that the believer sees the loss, acknowledges that he almost certainly misread or misunderstood the situation but then that he resolves to continue to invest himself into those things that he believes are right.

In such a situation, the believer will learn from his error - and, in Christ, we know that even our errors will work together for our good, that we might grow into maturity. Why, who is it that makes no mistakes and is perfect in each and every decision they make? Or in each and every perception of the Will of God?

It seems obvious, therefore, that we should welcome 'losses' - if our hearts are right before God - because they're just as important to us as the times when we win.

It would be difficult to see the other type of reaction of the natural punter mirrored in the believer's life - that is, when he begins to 'chase his losses' and invests more and more of himself into new gambles and beliefs.

I've searched my mind for even the most implausible of experiences to twist to fit this particular scenario and yet I can't find any.

Not even one.

So, does the believer react solely with the knowledge of the loss but remain committed to go on and not allow it to affect the investment of his time and resources into other areas where he 'believes'?

Well, no.

In fact, in my experience, the believer hardly ever reacts this way. They've invented for themselves a brand new and entirely untenable position that not even the natural punter would lay on himself.

The believer - when faced with a loss - pretends that it is, in fact, a great victory.

Go figure.

So, to give an example from my own experience - and one that I could duplicate *ad nauseam* from experiences over the years - the local church had set itself to pray for the healing of one of the 'members' who was in hospital and at death's door.

This woman - as far as I remember - was in her eighties and had had a decent innings, but the church didn't believe that she should die.

At this point, I should point out that I'm not actually sure whether they believed that no one should ever die on their watch or whether it was just that they wanted to prolong *her* life, but I feel compelled to make the reader aware that *we all must die* - you may find this statement almost heretical in nature but take a look round your local graveyard and you'll see the truth in what I've just written. It doesn't matter how fervently you pray for people to live, they are, eventually, going to die.

That's the way of life, you see - it must end in death.

There can't be a resurrection without it.

So, off they went, praying for her healing - her full healing. That she would be discharged from the hospital

and be restored to the congregation, that they could rejoice in God that He had raised her up miraculously.

They were, quite obviously, investing themselves in their belief - and this must be to their credit. They had understood *that* much.

But the woman died.

Now the perception changed.

Had their prayers gone unanswered? Yes, of course...

...no! Wait! Dying and going to be with God was *the greater healing*. That is, it must've been what they had been praying for all along and God really *had* answered their prayers. Instead of acknowledging that they'd got it wrong and learning by their inability to know what the mind of God was in the situation, they could now rejoice that God had heard their prayers and had answered them fully.

Silly me! Why didn't I see that?

When they had been praying that the woman would be healed and would come into their midst once more, they were actually praying that she would die and would be gathered in to the congregation of believers in heaven! It strikes me that these types of believers have never found their true vocation in life - they should've been politicians.

It's like the punter running round the bookies with a slip in his hand shouting loudly that his horse finished second when he's only backed it to win.

'Look,' he'll tell his fellow punters, 'my horse finished twenty-five lengths in front of the odds-on favourite at odds of thirty-three to one.'

'Hang on, Fred,' one of his friends will say, 'the second favourite beat your horse in to second by three lengths. You backed a loser.'

'You're just being negative,' the punter replies, 'finishing in front of the favourite was the *greater victory*.'

The punter picks up nothing from the bookies. Indeed, he's poorer because of his delusional belief that he had a winner and he goes on to think that losing money is a great victory for him because he's able to put the spin on it to make it appear as if, no matter what he does, he's going from one degree of success to another.

But, of course, the punter never *really* believes that a loser is a winner (silly me, I really must give him the credit) - it's just the believer. The punter actually has his life firmly founded in reality while the believer thinks that to admit a loss is to undermine faith, to deny a work of God and to denounce their relationship with the One who died to save them.

(It's quite possible - and I mention this only as an aside - that there could be a Stewards' Enquiry and, having investigated the running of the race, they demote the winner to second and promote the second to first. That's entirely possible and it would be tantamount to God allowing a believer to die but then raising them from the dead when someone went to the corpse and imparted life to it. But no one thought of doing that in the situation I'm relating because physical death was seen as the final sentence - all very strange if they'd been so 'in faith' that the woman wasn't going to go to be with God *at that time*.)

While ever the Church continues to live in unreality, it won't grow.

I've shown in earlier articles that a loser is part of the winning process and that, without those experiences, the victory becomes meaningless. We shouldn't think that a failure is not possible within our experience as believers, but fully believe that *all things work together for good*.

Certainly, if we would learn from our losses, we would be moving on from one degree of maturity to another but, at best, we're treading water - yet, even if we drowned, I guess we'd see it as the *greater good*.

After all, didn't God say something about Living Water?

Backing a winner is another matter entirely - one that has its own set of possibilities. Just as a goal changes a football match, so does a winner change a betting pattern.

I mentioned that there were two main ways a loser changed a punter's reaction to future races - as far as I understand the matter, there are also two possibilities when it comes to winners.

Firstly, no change.

So, the small time punter puts on his cumulative bet each day and, eventually, he goes through the card and returns thousands of pounds for a meagre few pence. It's rare, but it *does* happen.

Now he can go on that holiday he's always wanted to go on, he can replace his worn out sofa, buy a widescreen television - you know the sort of thing - but he returns the next day to put on their same small stake cumulative bet.

For him, the big win may have changed his life, but it hasn't changed the way he bets.

The other type of punter may 'chase winnings' in a similar way to the 'chasing their losses' of the loser previously discussed. The 'winnings' are no longer his money - it's money retrieved from the bookie so what would he actually be losing if he blew it all on the horses, football or the likelihood of a Conservative victory at the

next General Election?

It's only betting with someone else's money so he's not really losing - so off he goes to invest and invest again. Maybe he'll strike it lucky and win even more - the chances are he won't and that, eventually, the bookie will get all his money back.

Yet there's a mixture of these two which is probably the more common - for, having won thousands, a punter may use most of his return to enjoy himself as the first punter would do but, taking some of the money, may have a hundred or a thousand pound bet *simply because he can*.

In this case, the majority of his winnings is never under threat. He has the chance to increase his winnings but he doesn't jeopardise what he wants to do with the large sum of money that he's suddenly acquired.

The Church - it has to be said - generally reacts to winning fairly well.

Many of the more 'successful' ministries over the years (what 'success' is to the believer is usually misunderstood but, for the time being, I'm willing to use the word in the generally incorrect worldly way that it's applied in spiritual matters) haven't been established from 'zero to hero' but have built upon success - one step after another - upon the fulfilment of a belief where individuals have invested time and resources in what they believe.

Some believers have 'limited success' and are given no opportunity to build upon it - this isn't to say that they lack the faith but, rather, that God has something uniquely different for them to achieve. The danger for them, perhaps, is to think that they should be 'succeeding' after ten years in the same way as others around them have done.

But God has designed us each for his own purpose and it's this to which we should be aspiring.

The main problem with 'success' for the believer, however, is in not knowing when to stop and, as such, we can closely mirror the punter who, upon returning a vast sum of money, keeps punting away until all of it - and more - has dwindled away and we're no better off than before we had the winning gamble.

For some ministries are simply 'for a time' and not 'for all time'.

God has His purposes that we are all too often blissfully unaware of. Indeed, we seem to think that any success we achieve must necessarily continue to be our experience when, in fact, He has something very different for us that we miss at putting our hands to.

Some of the believers that God has raised up within the Church to lead the Body in to more of the Truth have, sadly, encouraged by the demands of congregations on them, continued to be 'the name' that people want to flock and listen to.

If the wilderness experience of the children of Israel taught us one thing it was this - when the presence of God in the cloud moves on, we have to move with it or we'll be sitting around in the desert with no presence of God at our side.

We may enjoy grabbing our bucket and spade to build sandcastles in the wilderness but our one real purpose in life is to follow the presence of God - sooner or later a wave is going to roll in and wash your own efforts away.

It's much harder for a 'front' ministry to come to terms with the need to sit down and be quiet than it is for a member of the congregation to come to terms with being thrust forward into the limelight and leadership.

Once a 'leader' is there, we think that they must always remain in the same position, doing the same things *because God must will it*. But God moves on and the Body is composed of many parts - parts that, because God is Sovereign, can become more important for a time than others.

But only for a time.

Ministry is interchangeable, transferable and terminable, too.

Success and winning is for a time - failure and loss go hand in hand in this life. Where the former pair is experienced, the latter pair may be only one step away.

The 'knack' is always to know when we should stand up and lead and when it's our turn to sit down and be led. It's also necessary that the Church should be wise to allow those people God calls to lead, and to help those people who are called to return to being led to sit down and shut up.

And to know the difference.

Winning, success and victory, then, shouldn't be thought of as being a confirmation that a person should continue forever in the same manner. The times and seasons of God's dealings with man are such that He moves on and chooses first one, then another - while remaining faithful to all His children, supplying them with everything that they need.

The problem for believers is multi-faceted but, at the risk of being too glib, let me try and summarise it succinctly.

A believer should understand that their life will be made up of both winning *and* losing experiences - and that all things will work together for good.

If a loss, the believer needs to acknowledge their mistakes, misunderstandings and - dare I say it - their own stupidity at times. And, if a win, they shouldn't expect that the same victory will always lie close at hand through the same circumstances and methodology.

In *all* things, God will work and will give power in each situation - loss *or* win - in order to bring about the purpose of His will.



THE FEELING

'I've got a funny feeling inside that such-and-such a horse will win the next race,' said the guy standing next to me. I was sorely tempted to tell him that he should go see a doctor, that it was probably a sure sign of advancing influenza or something much, much worse - but I listened and observed.

As his horse flashed past the post in front, he came over and said, 'Told you so. It must've been a premonition.'

Of course, premonitions aren't uncommon - in hindsight.

In fact, they're all too common an occurrence amongst the betting fraternity when contact with 'something' is attributable to a winning selection when it was obvious that it didn't stand that great a chance and was certainly not the horse we would've chosen had we studied form.

Although, if I'm honest, these 'feelings' usually come to those who don't study form *at all* and who pick a horse because they like the sound of the name, the trainer's name and its coincidence with their aunt's grannies fourth removed cousin on their mother's side or the colour the jockey will be wearing.

Perhaps, even, all three.

If the punter was absolutely truthful, he'd tell you that he has far more losing premonitions than he does winning ones but, instead of realising that the head should really rule the heart in these matters, he often stumbles blindly on in search of a predictive intuition that will point him towards a disproportionate share of winners that will keep him in profit.

But where do these premonitions come from?

By rejecting the existence of a Supreme Being who's brought the Universe into being for the outworking of His own will and purpose, each person has rejected the supernatural. The only alternative is an evolutionary origin that cannot include the influence of beings greater than ourselves or of knowledge that's acquired to tell us the outcome of events before they take place.

Recently, I started reading a 'simple' (yeah, right) book that explained Einstein's theory of relativity along with explanations of time travel related to his formulae. I gave up about a quarter of the way through as the simplicity of the explanation started to make no sense whatsoever (and, besides, there were unexplained assumptions that were impossible to discover the source of) but I remember a statement that poo-pooed the possibilities of prophetic utterances because, it reasoned, as time travel was only possible into the future, information could not be despatched from there into the past (or, more accurately, where we stand - the present).

I totally agreed - and still do - with the statement as it was, based on the general theories being expounded in the book. When you look at the laws of the physical world as revealed or 'discovered' by the scientists of history, prophetic insights, knowledge of the future and the 'feeling' that a horse is going to win a race are totally impossible.

Such a series of mathematical formulae *cannot* disprove the non-existence of God but they do prove that *without God*, the supernatural is impossible to take place or, more specifically in this case, pre-knowledge of the future.

If, as the Bible maintains, God is not limited by the things that He's brought in to being by His one act of - and continued maintenance of - Creation, then the limitations we discover imposed on us by no means reflect the nature of the One who's brought them to bear upon the created order.

If we do get 'feelings' of events about to unfold (rather than feelings about events *as they're unfolding*¹), it doesn't undermine the theories of science and neither does it disprove them. It simply points towards a realisation that there exists a force outside our experience that can communicate with us and, therefore, it should challenge our scientific belief system to incorporate the 'unknown', the 'supernatural being', the 'outside, unseen influence'.

Simply saying that God cannot exist because theory disproves one facet of what *does* happen so that what's believed to be happening cannot, in reality, be occurring is not being true to the complete facts obtainable.

But neither does the existence of 'feeling' prove the infallibility of the Bible - even though many believers

¹ Feelings about events as they're unfolding is something rather different, especially when it occurs between a husband and a wife for, being one body, when one experiences, the other may also experience in some form or other. Hence the very real provision in marriage for a husband and wife to be able to appreciate the other person's reactions and feelings in a way no other person can. It also hints at the reason why a multitude of sexual partners can have the effect of confusing feelings and experiences because of the influence of past unions.

would want it do. The *least* it does - as already stated - is to prove the existence of something unseen that's bearing an influence upon men and women on earth.

That would be true if the feeling is genuine, of course.

To a great many people, it is.

In fact, it's *obviously* real. But, if it *is* obviously real, why isn't it obvious that the conclusion to which we should be drawn is that *we're not alone*? When it comes to not having a holistic understanding of our lives and circumstances, of having a working theory that holds together as a single uncontradictory unit, the unbeliever as well as the believer struggles.

And I'm certainly not going to defend the believer and raise them up above the unbeliever by supposing that they have it all worked out. In my own experience, a believer accepts snippets of beliefs when they're presented to them without stopping very often to think whether it contradicts another snippet that they already accept as truth - or whether, perhaps, it's parallel or paradoxical.

Believers tend not to spend much time chatting to me when they make a statement and I ask them how that fits in with another belief that I know they hold. Immediately, it seems, I'm made to descend by them into the position of devil's advocate when, in effect, I'm trying to get them to understand that, unless they have a foundation without cracks in it, they'll never be able to know right from wrong and neither to successfully build.

So, before I close, let me get back to the punter and their feeling, the scenario I proposed at the very beginning and one that I've experienced on a fair few occasions myself - that is, that something will occur that's not discernible from the circumstances that are easily observable.

If, as I would maintain, this feeling is purely natural then it must be tied in to something instinctive that's within most men and women.

It would be nice to think that this predictive feeling is nothing other than the subconscious brain making a quick assessment of a situation based upon previous stored memories and offering a quick suggestion in case a course of action needs to be undertaken rather than a detailed consideration be pondered and a course of action calmly opted for.

When 'fight or flight' situations are encountered, such a quick decision is vitally important and action in one form or another is better than impotence.

Therefore, the brain offers a suggestion when the punter reads form *when it has relevant memories that are kindled and called in to give a quick assessment of a course of action*. The punter may not even know that those memories are but the suggestion is often taken for a premonition when, in differing circumstances, it wouldn't be accepted as such².

But, further, very often when believers get this 'feeling' they misinterpret it as the voice of God telling them to do something because of what they perceive is about to happen (or, to put it in summary, we tend to let our hearts rule our heads in matters of faith).

As I've also previously said, confirmation that this feeling is right usually only comes with hindsight and the great many thoughts that never find fulfilment are simply disregarded while the successful ones are more likely boasted about, how God revealed His will to the individual. It's just a shame that the times when we got it totally wrong don't stand side by side with the successes so that we can determine the percentage accuracy of the feelings received.

If I'm true to Scripture (and, to be honest, it's best always to be), I can't think of many - if any - passages that speak about this feeling. I know a plethora of places where God directly spoke to individuals and they knew immediately what was to take place, but that it's described as a feeling is hardly mentioned.

In order to justify our feelings, though, we do often equate the direct speech by God to his servants as the very same as we experience.

Following these 'feelings', we step out of a commitment to where we are and the people around us, only to move on from another place we've 'felt' to go when another 'feeling' prompts us to do something different. And we even get 'confirmations' that these feelings are right - although, in truth, if you look for the sign, it's normally found if you wait long enough or look hard enough.

Feelings undermine commitment when followed and are often interpreted as being discernment when they're nothing of the sort. They stop the Church advancing because no sooner does something happen than

² For example, when the wife tells you that their mother is coming and there's a gut feeling that you're needed down the pub, a clear case of a 'fight or flight' situation when the latter option looks the most viable and pleasurable.

people get the 'feeling' that they need to leave and go elsewhere³ - sustaining a move from God cannot be achieved when there's a break up of a core of believers who've integrated themselves together as a team.

Just like the punter who has premonitions is normally the one who doesn't take much notice - if at all - of form, so the believer who's constantly relying on 'feelings' is not usually a person who has any idea of the foundational beliefs of the 'faith' they profess to follow. Indeed, the experience of the supernatural is often elevated above the assuredness of sound reason and teaching.

What I'm saying, therefore, is that we should be extremely careful when it comes to a sudden sense that events will transpire. It would be safer to do what I've hinted at in this article - write down each and every time such a prediction seems to be given and see what percentage is accurate.

And be honest.

If the percentage success is low then, almost certainly, these feelings or senses are not supernatural bestowals of knowledge by God and may be more rightly thought of as something instinctive that promotes or hinders survival, a quick assessment offered to the conscious to give an option of action should a quick choice need to be made.

They may be not much more than the influence of a certain type of cheese on the senses, the onset of a minor illness or, even, wind.

³ I am always amazed at how a leader for a congregation comes to them declaring that God has called them into their midst and then, when things start going badly wrong, God majestically calls them away somewhere else because their time is up and completed, leaving behind them a group of people who need the next leader to resolve their problems and who needs to emphasize their own calling to them that they might have faith in his ministry. This self-perpetuating catastrophe was all too common an experience in my early years as a believer when I worked in a series of fellowships throughout England as a 'general help'. No one ever questioned it - after all, if the leader said they were called, who were the individuals of the congregation to disagree with God's anointed?

CHELTENHAM 2010 (Excerpts)

A Festival Win

The yellow silks, reflecting sun, the red and blue, the emerald hoops,
Chevroned front, quartered tops, blue striped sleeves and leather boots.
Geldings grey - yet almost white - the chestnut brown with blinkers red,
Sheepskin nosebands, tongue-tie tights, manes caress about the head.

Milling round, tightening girths, the jockeys show their charge the fence,
Still too early, turn again, round they go, emotions tense.
The babble of the watching crowd, peer through bins and don't forget
The colours of their chosen horse upon whose back they've placed their bet.

Never greater sight is seen as horses plenty shuffle round,
Lining up, nearing tape, that's raised as horses thunder ground.

They're off.

The surge of sound that leaves the stands,
The roar from mouths of many lands,
Reverberations soon subside
Traversing far the jockeys ride.

Across the course the horses race
Soon to reach that certain place,
The furthest point to which they've fetched
They turn for home, the final stretch.

The commentator's voice is drowned
As anxious voices loudly sound,
Shouting as they rise the climb,
Flashing past the winning line.

Photo.

Sound subsides, the crowd is hushed, bookies offer on the shout.
Tickets held, firmly grasped, they think they've won, but always doubt.
The speaker bursts back in to life, thousands listen, hearts of dread.
Victor named and runner up, the winning distance just a head.

The yellow silks, reflecting sun, the red and blue with splattered mud,
The breathless horse and jockey gasping, wiping fevered brow and blood.
Walking back, the cheering crowd, the stable lad with beaming grin,
Owners weep and trainers cry, there's nothing like a Chelt'nham win.



Involvement

Being at the Champion Hurdle is not about turning up one day to watch a race - there are plenty of races throughout the year for you to do that with. It's about watching the trails, seeing the horses improve through the season, thinking about which trainers have been progressing their horse towards this single race.

The horse that's showed its best is not always the horse who'll win - it's the horse who's ready for the day, who has that little bit of luck in running, who manages to crawl over the second last in tact when others meet the rising ground and crash through the brushwood.

For the spectator, it's about *being there*.

From the pre-parade ring to the Paddock, from the walk to the course to the parade, to the cantering down to the start, the tightening of the girth, the milling around, jostling for the required position as you walk in to the gate and the Starter raises the tape.

Last year, it started for one horse getting up in a half-decent race to win by a head, of capsizing at the last in a race at Kempton that seemed to be at its mercy, of being thwarted in having another run due to bad weather until it finished third behind future opponents on heavy ground, but hardly ticking the right boxes if you were on the lookout for a winner.

Perfecting fitness and bringing it on, it screamed over the last in the Champion Hurdle with its head in front, two horses joining it alongside up the run in, gaining with every stride, desperately waiting for the line to come and the roar subside, winning by a neck and a head in the tightest of finishes through the four day Festival.

But no two races are the same - and, this year, a different set of questions need asking. Lots of them, too numerous to mention here, too difficult to contemplate and solve until *after* the race. But you can try, you can have them in your mind as they canter to post, as they line up to get under way, as the race develops before your eyes.

And, although the Champion is won here, on this day, at this track, it's what's gone before that's more important for the outworking of the race. If you've not done the preparation before you sit down in front of the television or the tape goes up when you're at the course, then it's just a bunch of horses galloping round a track for some prize money.

Or a race to lose money on.

I wonder what a believer thinks that going to a Church meeting is?

If it's just a service, an organised array of religious items and rites that are got through systematically and collectively, a weekly necessity to tick all the right boxes on earth so that we might, when we're dead, be able to hold up the score sheet and say 'Hey! Look, God! You can't fail me cos I got enough marks to be able to say that I was there where it mattered!', then we're without understanding.

As I said above, it's preparation that's everything.

Neither racing nor religion should ever be about turning up somewhere but, rather, it should prompt a conclusion to what has been going on previously, an extension of the life, the interest, of studying and involvement where being there isn't the experience itself but an integral part of the process.

What I mean is *not* that there are certain religious ceremonies that should take place *before* the 'main event', as if there's an obligatory procedure that has to be followed. No. What I mean is that *doing* is simply a reflection of *being*.

If you *know* Jesus, you want to *do* - not ceremony, but interaction. If you're doing it because you *have to*, even because you *like to*, forget it. That's addiction - and I've already commented on that in a previous article.

If you do it because *He* wants you to, then that's a whole lot different - in that case, it's about relationship, it's about responding to Life, the one true Life, and will pull away from all manner of ceremonies that take the place of reality.

You'll even find that the ceremony sickens you when there's no life - the same as endless bets on race after race for gambling's sake sickens me, frightens me, makes me want to take people and shake them to try and wake them up, to say to them 'Enjoy the race, not just the outcome if it goes in your favour!'

Amongst those at Cheltenham this year - as it will be every year - will be those who've come to gamble. After all, it's the biggest event at which to do so in the season. But, for many others, it's the conclusion of a process, an involvement that started months before that sees the Festival as an expression of what they've been living and experiencing - and *that* involvement has *nothing whatsoever to do with gambling*.

Racing Uncertainty

A racehorse doesn't stand any better chance to win a race whether it's a warm favourite or a rank outsider

- it has the same chance whether thousands of pounds are bet on it finishing in front of the others or if one old woman in Cleethorpes is the only one who puts fifty pence each way on it.

While the favourite is generally thought to be the best horse in the race, the *actual* chance of that horse winning isn't affected by its price in the betting market.

So, when money changes hands and horses shorten their odds, you aren't witnessing the *chance* of the horse getting its nose in front increasing - all you're able to conclude is that more people fancy that horse to run well than most of the others.

It's fallacious to think that, because a horse is being backed, it must have a greater chance than one that's drifting out in the market - no amount of money changes the horse's chance of winning. It will run as well as or as badly as it was going to run whether it shortens or drifts in the market.

Neither does the horse know if it's favourite - or that it's an outsider.

All it knows is that it was woken up to be fed that morning, was transported in a vehicle to arrive at a racetrack and that it's been parading in a paddock with humans stood around watching it. It simply has no idea that it's four to seven favourite or that one person will win twenty thousand pounds if it passes a red circle on a pole in front of all the other horses.

If it's got a stomach ache, it has no means of being able to convey that to the general public - indeed, even if it did, it couldn't be bothered as it wouldn't think it important. If it's got a headache, it won't tell you and, certainly, if it really doesn't want to be there, the horse will probably look very much the same as it would if it would rather be asleep in its stable.

So, the horse will just do what it will do - which is why certainties often lose and why outsiders often excel to romp home to victory when the form suggested that they would be better made in to glue.

If you remember these things, you will do better than someone who simply follows the crowd and who goes after the majority view. Unless you're the trainer or jockey, you *cannot* influence the outcome of a horse race in any realistic way and your support of a runner does nothing to increase or lessen its chances.

Chance is a funny mistress and one that we give far too much credence to.

Many still believe that the chances of God meeting with them is much greater in the *big* meetings with their *favourite* speakers bringing the message than it is in that quiet place where they stand or kneel alone before Him.

Some venture to suggest that the holy sites of Christendom are the fait accompli when it comes to feeling something of the presence of the One who worked a miracle there centuries ago and who will almost certainly show His face again in the not too distant future.

But there are no favourites when it comes to finding a place where God will turn up - you are no more likely to find Him in the celebratory, twenty thousand seat auditorium than you are in the echoey church hall where three old women and an old farmer with his half-blind and smelly sheepdog have turned up for another weekly prayer meeting.

Your chances of meeting with God are the same anywhere on earth because of the simple truth that it's not possible for a man to go anywhere to be able to flee from His presence. If God pervades all then surely the *chances* of you meeting with Him must be likely anywhere and everywhere?

God will do what He will do - that's God for you.

He doesn't often turn up in the sure fire certainty of a location where many have gathered in His name to meet with Him and to feel His presence. He chooses your journey on the bus, when you're washing the dishes or when you're doing a crossword puzzle on the toilet, to turn up and make Himself known.

The only certainty with God is the uncertainty, the surprise, the innovation.

If finding a winner in a horse race was all about seeking out the favourite then life would be boring - and, likewise, if encountering God was predictable, tied in to either time or location, we would have been able to limit Him by our own definitions and expectations.

God is unpredictable...

...just like, it would appear, the outcome of the opener at Cheltenham is this year.

BetFred

'Could I take the prices on those, please?'

The cashier took one look at the betting slip and frowned. My habit has been rather consistent when it comes to placing bets in Bookies of late - I've set up a betting slip stencil on my word processor software so I can type out the selections and make them as neat as possible, then print them off with slips that I've already taken from the shop.

This, I believe, is the best way to make sure that no handwriting can be misread, no accidental error is made out to be a totally different horse in the race and, more, that I can spend as little time in the shop as

possible.

But, it would appear, after these weeks leading up to Cheltenham, there was a fundamental problem with my 'habit'.

'Oh dear,' the Cashier began, 'we can't have betting slips printed out in case you lose it.'

It didn't make any sense to me so I asked for an explanation.

'If you lose your slip and have to write out a copy to get paid, we have to match your handwriting to make sure it's you.'

I assured the lady that I wasn't going to lose the slip but, if I did, I could bring an exact copy of the slip to the place as I always save the selections.

She didn't think that would be sufficient - after all, anyone could type out the *exact* same selections I'd done with the *exact* same money on each in the *exact* same format with the *exact* same font, even though they had never seen the betting slip as it kept on the Bookies side of the counter.

'Okay,' I said, 'I'll put my signature on it. That way, there'll be no problem.'

Without a moment's thought, she replied, 'Oh no, *anyone* could have your signature.'

I made a mental note to use that as an excuse in case there's ever a cheque I sign that I would rather not have done. I'm sure the Bank would be very sympathetic to my having a signature that isn't unique.

But, surely, if I lost my slip, it was *my* problem. If someone else had my signature, wasn't that *my* problem, not hers? And, as I was the only one in the shop that morning - apart from the Cashier - it seemed highly unlikely that there could be more than two suspects if a signature was forged to get the returns from a bet.

The Cashier dialled Head Office and asked for their opinion.

They agreed that *anyone* could have my signature - even me - so they wouldn't take the bet unless I wrote it out in my handwriting, presumably because *no one* could have handwriting similar to me, only an identical signature.

'What if I just wrote the horses' names underneath the typeface? Would that be okay?'

'No, it wouldn't,' the Cashier told me, 'It must be handwritten only.'

I performed the instruction with an amused grin on my face that the Cashier probably mistook for wind and asked once more for the prices on the horses.

This time, it was all hunky dory.

Now I had licence to lose my betting slip.

4.40 - The David Nicholson Mares Hurdle

They call the last race on any card 'The Get Out Race' because it's the last opportunity for the punter to 'get out of' a place of debt by backing a winner.

Such a mindset isn't good - you should never go chasing a loss for it leads to greater and greater investment that blindly stakes money on horses that you wouldn't, in your right mind, ever have supported to that level.

When faced with a loss - whether at the race track or in *normal* life - you have to be prepared to turn your back on it and walk away realising, as I've said before, that losses have to be made. They're a part of life, as much as walking and breathing and talking.

As believers, we fail to grasp the facts of life, even the facts of faith, that success and victory as defined by the world is not winning in the spiritual sense for, from frequently time to time in the West and regularly in the Third World, our lives will be clearly marked out by material loss.

Leaving aside persecution (which, I say to our shame, many in the West still believe will never happen and, if it does, think that they will retain their own world around them with a few minor inconveniences, resulting in an entire generation of believers failing to prepare for the inevitable), investments will fail, clothes will wear out, cars and possessions will decay and break down and, eventually, bits of our own bodies will not only cease to function but may even need to be extracted to cause us to be able to have a better quality of life or to keep living and breathing (if that's your choice. If we believe that the awaiting glory beyond the grave is so immeasurably greater than that which is on *this* side, I wonder why we try to cling on for a few more years, living confessions that life is 'better than the alternative'.).

Loss is a trait of the degenerative nature of this world that has been ordained by the God who also subjected it in hope (cue that verse from Paul in his letter to the church at Rome).

It's about how you deal with the loss that's more important - if you sit around and mope your days away, live in despair and regret while the world goes about its business and worry over what you once possessed but which is no longer your own, you're never really going to grow or learn - unless, of course, you learn *not* to sit around and mope the next time.

No believer should suffer as a transgressor, Peter said in a letter. Not only because it shows the believer up to be not wholly true to his relationship with Jesus but because the suffering can only help them realise that it would be more wise if they didn't transgress again.

Suffering when you've done nothing wrong, however, strengthens the resolve and draws you close to the One who alone can 'restore, establish, and strengthen'.

Likewise, loss isn't meant to drag you downwards but elevate you to learn to be more like Jesus who, counting loss as a means towards an end, gave away His own life so that believers might gain His and lose theirs.

If loss wasn't a necessary part of conversion, even, how could any of us be saved? But many, and the Church today seems to be full of people who have this mindset, seem to think that following Christ is about *adding* to their lives rather than to lose everything in that one instant when they're born again within so that they might gain all that God has for them.

And, as the believer goes through life, they must be content to lose in order to gain - no selfish thoughts, here, though. We aren't talking of losing a one litre clapped out Skoda to gain a three litre Mercedes Benz - we're talking of losing the Skoda to have no material replacement but to grow closer to Jesus and to become more like Him.

Sheesh, this christianity stuff is frightening.

The last race on the card, then, should never be thought of as a chance to win back the loss - although, if you've provided for another loss at the start of the day and aren't chasing a return to 'get you out of trouble', you're still staying firmly within your means - but simply as a race to be further enjoyed with no regrets, no anxieties, no desperation.

There's always something to be learnt, something to observe if your eyes are opened - although, sometimes, you have to scratch a fair way below the surface to get to the root of the matter.

For me, though, the last race on the card kindled in me a rather natural desire of looking forward to a Little Chef meal on the way home as I hadn't eaten anything substantial since breakfast. At worst, it would be simply a time of money loss but of subsequent weight gain.

I had assured Kath that her selection, Carole's Legacy, stood no hope in the final race. Sure, it may finish second if one of the two strong favourites fell over but, realistically, it shouldn't be in the first three.

Nevertheless, with a sigh and a groan, I went in to the betting ring and covered the day at odds of twenty-two to one.

When Carole's Legacy came over the second last in front and with not much behind it that was looking to be a danger, I made a mental note never to be so stupid again and got on with the more important job of shouting it home.

As they neared the last, the favourite, Quevega, stuck its head in front and, to our combined shouts of 'Fall! Fall!', skipped sprightly over the last and drew clear on the run in to win by a margin of just over four lengths.

Although not to be, it was a great conclusion to a day's, well, racing, I guess.

The problem with Cheltenham is that it's become the place to be, as I've previously written, and no amount of encouragement will ever see it return to a Festival of racing in its purest form.

While race tracks like Sedgefield, Hexham and Market Rasen run the course as a business but will never rise to the heights of fame like Cheltenham, they retain the essence of racing as much as they're able.

It would be wrong for me to say that small is beautiful when it comes to Racing but, when you grow big, you experience problems that you never encounter when you're small and lowly.

As Roy Keane once intimated, when you grow to global proportions, the presence of the Prawn Sandwich brigade is inevitable and the 'sport' begins to suffer from the hangers on who, while they bring cash to the events, they wouldn't be seen dead at the grassroots level.

Should Rotherham United ever reach the Premiership, you can be sure their crowds will exponentially grow, their new found finance will build corporate hospitality boxes and the game will largely become secondary to the business, except, of course, that success is now the *raison d'être*, the one sole measurement of a good season because it brings in more money.

The same has, unfortunately, become true in Horse Racing.



HOVE GREYHOUNDS

I have now been four times to Hove Greyhound Stadium - once, at the very beginning, with my wife and three times on my own - and I'm certain that, as far as I can be, that there's no longer any reason for me to go again.

I wouldn't say that I *won't* go again - only that I don't see any real reason for me to go there to learn anything further.

Hove is a long way from Sheffield where we live and, though it could be understood how we might have gone there on a single occasion while we were on holiday down on the South Coast, four times seems just a little excessive.

The truth is I've found myself down here to look after my parents' affairs from April and May intermittently and from June semi-permanently as they use their elderly season tickets for medical care in various 'obviously professional' through amateurish to 'hand me the saw and let's get this leg off now' health establishments that are littered in and around Eastbourne.

So, here I am on the South Coast, needing an occasional day or afternoon out just to break the monotony.

I would rather have driven over to Plumpton for a National Hunt meeting, although the cost of a day out would be much higher than a greyhound meeting and, during Summer, they seem to shut down to go on holiday. I passed the course on the train a couple of weeks ago and noticed the grass was brown as a result of the semi-drought we've been experiencing.

And I guess I could've tried for Fontwell - but that doesn't have a meeting on until August. The rest of the courses are flat races and, in my totally unbiased and perceptive opinion, not worth wasting either one's time or money at.

So, Hove.

About twenty-five miles away along the coast, west, just passed Brighton and overlooking the sea, the good roads here mean that I can do the journey in thirty to forty minutes if I don't get stuck behind an old ditherer (Eastbourne is the only place I know where, when you reach a thirty miles per hour sign, it's an invitation for the car in front of you to speed up) or, worse, someone who speeds up when you *can* overtake them and slows to twenty where you can't.

In Bexhill-on-Sea, just a few miles to the west, I honestly think that there's a case for renaming the 'Help The Aged' charity shop 'Help Yourself' for I've never seen a young person in that town and the clanging of a metal-framed Zimmer frame is more likely to be heard than the squeaky compression of a child's toy.

People who have naturally coloured hair are also in the minority against the blue-rinse brigade who congregate like packs of wolves at any point in the streets that are necessarily left vacant by people with common sense to facilitate pedestrian access.

They also have no idea how to handle a supermarket trolley and will swerve out into your way - just as they buy the highest-powered, top of the range, totally brand new automobile to drive in second gear on single carriageways where they're constantly using the brake pedal because of the excessive g-force when they turn a corner.

But I'm digressing - and probably repeating myself, too. I really need to get on and tell you about the Greyhound track.

As tracks go - and I've been to a fair few in my time (Walthamstow, Wimbledon, Wembley, Charlton, Crayford, Portsmouth, Catford and Ramsgate being the ones I can recall) - this one is another.

It only employs one straight side of the circuit as the place where punters can stand, three-quarters being sealed off and rather dead. The facilities are adequate if you're there during a night meeting but rather lacking if you turn up for a morning or afternoon, the markets are minute (more on that later) and you frequently get crowds of holidaymakers huddled together, giggling and shouting ecstatically as their dog comes in to a place and they return a staggering £1.26 for a £1 layout.

The racing surface is sand with cambered bends, it has a hare that looks like a weathercock from a World War Two airstrip and the idea of parading the dogs to warm them up before the race is to walk them once passed the stands and then back to the traps a few minutes before the race.

The announcer also thinks that, when the hare's running, it means the dogs are 'Under Starter's Orders' so he's probably been demoted from race calling at some horse track or other - or else this is one of his many sidelines. He also announced that the starter was looking 'very bright and breezy' (at least he didn't say she was 'wet and windy' although he may have done just that at another meeting when I wasn't present) over the tannoy one Sunday morning, so it's also incredibly likely that he boozes the time away in his little box and forgets the importance of maintaining some sort of minimum standard.

But, when it comes to minimum standards, Hove seems to be the epitome of the definition for there's nothing there that I could say stood out in the memory as being wholly remarkable or unusual.

Except, perhaps, the on course Betting Shop that refuses to accept any wagers on the races at the course itself. Or the ground floor refreshments outlets that are closed on morning and afternoon meetings.

Or the bookmakers who have a wail of a time cutting and lengthening odds on their boards when they aren't taking any money on the races, spending all their time gazing at the computer screens behind the display boards and shouting out the odds that most people ignore. I'm not even sure why they bother to turn up for the afternoon meetings.

And the tote operators either read or do their knitting in between taking money and issuing betting slips with that 'Do you really think I want to be here and not lying on some beach in the Bahamas?' face that, if it ever once showed a glimmer of a smile, the local newspapers would be headlining the event as a miracle that rivalled the Immaculate Conception.

Hove probably owes its existence nowadays to the ownership of Corals, one of the leading High Street bookmakers, who underpin the losses that an enterprise such as this must make. Their *raison d'être* is surely to provide live dog racing in the nation's shops on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays and the revenue generated for the 'rights' of that coverage has surely got to be the spine of their income.

Everything else that's taken at the track has got to run at a loss - so much so that there's free entry on the three meetings mentioned, so desperate are they to get people in through the doors to spend some money. If they were to lock the gates, lay off the service staff and rely solely on the revenue generated from the rights of live coverage, I'm sure that they'd actually see their profit margins increase.

It was the second of my four visits to the track and a Sunday.

The last race was due to be off in a few minutes and, from where I was standing, trap 5 looked like the best value for money.

Although sure to be slow out the traps, it had little to its left or right that would get out at the same time, would be likely to get a clear run round the first bend (one of the most important things to determine when it comes to race reading) and, from somewhere down the back straight to the finishing line, would be gaining, paw over knuckle, any dog that was left in front of it.

And it was a good price, too.

As I was already up on the meeting, I decided to have a wager at a decent price and sat back to watch the drama unfold.

Amazingly, I got the reading of the race correct. As the mechanical bunny released the grilles and the dogs burst from their traps, five got out last or second last but, by going wide, avoided the trouble and was handily placed down the back straight to begin its assault on the lead.

Turning in to the straight, it came like a bolt of lightning to challenge the long time leader, Trap 4, but was also having to compete with the fast finishing six that, as far as I could see from my race card, was supposed to get out fast and fade - hadn't the dog been reading the script? What do they do all day in the kennels if it isn't study the form of their next races?

As the line approached, five and six were nod for nod, side by side, flashing passed the lights to 'Photo finish. Please retain all betting slips'.

I walked briskly over to the screens to watch the rerun and, sure enough, six seemed to get his head in front on the line. Five yards further on, five was in front - but that's not what counts, unfortunately.

One of the massing crowd of the four of us turned and asked 'Who d'you think's won?'

'Six,' I said.

'Yeah, so do I,' came the response. 'That's great that is.'

'Not for me, it's not,' I smiled, 'I'm on five.'

Just then, the announcer called the result as six first, five second and, just before the guy walked away, he said, 'That six dog deserves that win - after all they've been doing to him these passed few weeks.'

In a moment he was gone - and so was I. Off to the car park and the drive back home. But I couldn't get the words out of my mind - the dog deserved it.

The dog - that piece of fur with legs - deserved to win that race.

Deserved to win.

Because of how they'd been *treating* him.

I drove home thinking of that poor dog and what he'd been through - the taunting from the other dogs in the kennel that he was a shadow of his former self, the owners who'd drive miles to come and see him and tell him 'What do you think you're playing at? Don't you have the heart to win anymore?', the trainer who'd refuse to give him any food until he shaved a tenth of a second off his seasonal best, the kennel handlers who'd giggle

whenever they opened the door, laughing at his gaunt appearance, teasing him he was useless.

Yes, they were treating him *rotten*, no doubt about it.

And, because of all that rough, ill-conceived, distressing and humiliating experience, he'd just gone and pulled one out of the bag, so to speak - there and then, right in front of all sixteen of us who'd been crammed into the extensive grandstand that Sunday.

He'd done it, he'd bloody gone and done it, that's what.

The humanisation of animals is all very well and good but we certainly do need some sort of reality check when it comes to racing.

When the greyhound is brought to the track, he almost certainly knows he'll have a moving object to chase in a short while. He's been there before, done it and has probably got the teeshirt nailed up on his kennel wall just to prove it.

When he gets put in to the traps and he hears the whirr of the, for want of a better word, hare grind into action, he knows that the grille in front of him is about to disappear and he'll be running for his life to try and catch that thing that's moving in front of him.

He probably rarely ever wonders why he's never been able to catch one yet - or what they must taste like if he were to dig his teeth into its fur. He just runs - he knows that's what he does so he does it.

He doesn't know where the finishing line is anymore than he knows what species of plant you'd use to cure insomnia. He doesn't see dogs to beat, he sees something moving to run after.

All this idea of a dog *trying* to win, of him *deserving* the win, of him having the guts to get back on terms with a dog who's overtaken him so that he can get his head in front - all this - is pure bunkum.

We think in those sorts of terms and it legitimises our support of the selections we make, of where our money will go and of which animal will get our hopes thrust upon it (although it knows nothing of such things) - and we feel justified (and not a little bit elated) when the greyhound seems to fulfil our understanding and our beliefs.

It creates satisfaction in us, pleasure and, hopefully, a decent financial reward, too.

With our giving, we do the very same things.

In the Church, I mean.

We get behind people, organisations, ministries, because they reflect the image we believe in, they represent the stories that we want to be associated with.

We feel so sorry for the underprivileged, the deprived, the grief stricken, the abused and our response is often to put our hands in our pockets and get the blue and reds out into the channels of offering available.

We want to be a part of that failing ministry - or, better, that ministry that we're being told is failing - through lack of financial support, not realising that, if God has stopped supporting it, why should we be getting involved?

While there's a very real sense that nothing will get done in the Church without His people putting their hands in to their pockets and providing for it, there's also the racing certainty that ministries that have long since died and been buried continue to be supported by us because they offer us a fulfilment of the dreams we hold on to.

We love to support the story, the vision we share, the person that sounds a chord within - we want to be a contributor and rarely understand that we've become the exploited.

The reason advertising *works* is because the image portrayed is the image that large sections of society want to buy in to and, by buying the product, you naturally assume that you're taking on the image.

As my wife pointed out only recently, if you made all 'off road', four-by-four pick up vans with monster wheels, silver-metal roll bars and the like come only in the shade of pink, you'd destroy the market overnight. Why? Because black is the image people want. So, advertise black and people buy in to that image. Advertise pink and you'll go in to liquidation.

It's a clever way to manipulate society - whether commercial or political, it makes no difference.

The problem is that we tend not to support those people and ministries that don't make us feel as if we're a part of them, of sharing the 'vision'. The result is that we have an imbalanced giving strategy that makes many believers rich and powerful while others can never get the support they need to fulfil their calling.

And the lack of funds, we say, is a sure sign that God's not in it.

Actually, from my own experience, I'd say that an over abundance of resource is just as much an indication for we invest in structures that give us the image we want, that meet our spiritual yearnings by allowing us to become financial contributors, adopting the image of the caring, loving believer who is doing the Lord's will.

We want to be on the cutting edge of a new move of God so advertise the new building project as a step forward as an expansion of the witness into society, that we need more resources not to restrict what God is wanting to do through us and you'll find the building fund soar. Say that you want a bigger place that's more comfortable and has nice chairs and you won't get the same response (well, from some you might).

If you present the right vision that people want to own, then the resource will always come flooding in. But there *are* no stories worth supporting - whether in greyhounds, horses or individuals.

The only reality check we need is to raise up men and women from within the Church that there might be a multiplicity of ministries rather than an imbalance between the great and famous and the meek and impoverished.

In total, I watched forty-five races at Hove during my four attendances there, I - or my wife and I - had a bet on every race that we watched, amounting to thirty-seven races in which we decided to do a forecast (first and second in the correct order) and eight in which we backed a single dog to either win or be placed.

That's a rough generalisation, of course, but you get the idea.

Including petrol money, entrance fees and refreshments, we ended up spending a total of £106 over those four occasions, roughly £27 a time. And, as days or afternoons out go, that isn't all that bad.

It was after the forty-fifth - the very last race I went to (and there was one final race to stay for but I decided to get out of the car park and leave as it was getting late and I was growing tired - I was already an hour and a half past my bedtime) - that I heard an all too familiar statement from someone in the crowd (for want of a better word) of spectators.

I'd decided on Trap 4, a dog that was 'sure' (as you can be) to get out in front like greased lightning by the first bend and be a couple of lengths clear turning down the back straight. The only problem was that I wasn't sure if it could hold that lead in the home straight as it seemed to be better over distances about forty metres shorter.

Sure enough, though, coming round the final bend, Trap 1 challenged up the inside and beat four to the line by a distance the equivalent of about nine inches. Win, lose or dead heat, I've discovered (as I've previously written) that life throws all varieties of results at us and, though genuinely disappointed, I am fairly stoical that Truth can be learnt from all manner of things.

I was in no way disgruntled or angry with the dog, the bastard. No, that's wrong. It was a lady dogs race so I should really say 'the bitch'.

However, as Trap 1 got up on the line (or, better, as Trap 4 faded which *made* it look like Trap 1 had accelerated passed it), a man standing next to me shouted loudly - and demonstrably - to the crowds and, especially, his female companion beside him:

'Yeah. Easy. It was so obvious it would win. I told you so.'

Having suppressed the urge to grab him by the throat and dash his head against the brick wall that was immediately behind us, an action that, although surely justified and demanded by the occasion, would have been considered to have been marginally against the law (but I can't think why), I thought about some of the other races I'd watched when the same reaction had passed people's lips, that 'I told you I'm right' mentality that comes from people so utterly insecure of their own worth that they have to try and put down others' opinions and ideas because they consider themselves to be the keepers of the sacred revelation given to them and no one else.

Although I've probably already gone way beyond any subtle hint at where I intend going with this article and you can see this coming like an approaching express train sounding its horn with disco lights flashing all over the front engine, let me share with you those things that greatly annoy me when I receive correspondence about our web site.

I have no problem discussing matters with people. Neither do I have any problem with people sending me information and asking me whether that fits in with the teaching I've put together. I also don't have a problem with people wanting to know what I believe (although it does rather annoy me seeing as what I believe is on the web site and they clearly don't want to take the time to read it).

What I *do* object to is people who have already decided that they have the sum total of all truth, light and goodness and that, unless I convert to their position, I am a child of satan, in league with the devil and destined for hell fire unless I repent.

Emails like this usually have me reaching for the 'Delete' button with all rigour and righteous zeal attributable to my actions. A bit similar to wanting to dash that punter's brains out when his dog beat mine.

I have even - on more than a few occasions - received an email with what appeared to be a genuine question about a doctrinal point and, having responded, received an email back telling me words to the effect, 'Well, that's where you're wrong because...'

I've learnt that when such a thing happens, it's best to fly off the handle as the 'softly, softly' approach just doesn't work. I normally respond by asking them how they have dared waste my time by asking for information *that they already have*.

It's like saying to someone, 'I was wondering, what year did England win the World Cup?' and, when they answer, '1966', you say either, 'No, you're wrong, it was 1968' or 'I knew that'.

What on earth is the point of the question in the first place? Either way, it's a design to make the initiator look good, clever, bright and, perhaps most importantly, *right*. 'Right' because we like to justify ourselves by whatever means possible. At anyone's expense.

I'm quite willing to correct my web site if it's wrong (and I have done on a few occasions - sometimes because it's been pointed out to me that I've misunderstood or misinterpreted a fact). But does anyone really think that I'm going to respond to one of their emails with something along the lines:

'Yes, you know, Jesus can't have died on a Friday just because the Scriptures say so and it was wrong of me to prove it by reference to contemporary writings and the Scriptures. I really should believe what you've told me against the testimony of Scripture, of sound reason and basic intelligence.'

I guess I *could*. But I won't.

Even though it pains me to have to say it at this point because it sounds so proud and self-righteous, most of the people who write to me by email are just plain wrong. Clearly, blindly and unreachable.

Neither do I intend denying those things that I've been shown.

My following of Christ has usually been one in which the Church has taken the concerted view that they don't want to allow me to speak, to minister, to witness - indeed, even to attend their meetings.

I actually thank God that this has been so and am certainly not bitter about the matter one little bit <cough>...

If I'd allowed it to get to me and withdrawn myself into a darkened corridor and stuck my thumb (of either hand) up my backside and cried a lot, I could say that it had had a detrimental effect on me.

But it only spurred me into action.

It only propelled me to make the world my congregation and the web site my lectern from which I can freely give away what Christ has given.

They wouldn't entertain me, the Church said, often by their actions and not by words, by their cold shouldering and closing of an open door to speak. They didn't want me.

I doubt if they ever will.

But in that lies an opportunity for God knows, God sees. Perhaps, even, God has caused it to happen for, without such a rejection, the web site could not and would not have come in to being.

And now that I've taught on Gambling?

Oh my goodness! Well, they wouldn't accept me now because of the words of this book that've been published on the site. There again, even if the words weren't here, they still wouldn't accept me.

Why?

Because they're right and I'm wrong. Lost in my own teaching and error, refusing to submit to their way of thinking and conform to the image of the god they've created.

There's one thing that I'm totally sure of and that is that I was absolutely right to back Trap 4. Let those who opt for Trap 1 rejoice and think themselves right.

Only when the Final Day dawns will each of us know whether the gambles we've made in this life have paid off. And I've probably condemned myself once again by mentioning that word 'gambling' in the same sentence that justifies a spiritual principle.



GAMBLING

Foreword

I have included my notes on Gambling here from which the pdf file of 'Winners and Losers' is linked, to make sure that they aren't by-passed in a search for information on Racing.

These notes appeared on the Miscellaneous section of <http://www.arlev.co.uk> a long time before the main section ever saw the light of day - and were put together months (or, perhaps, a couple of years) before my wife and I decided to go to an occasional Horse Race meeting after an abstinence of, for me, about twenty years.

Whenever the Bible is silent on specific subjects, one is forced into wondering why that should be and of trying to come to grips with the hints and pointers that appear in the text. Yet we must also try always not to make hard and fast rules, laws where God chose not to record any.

As such, because of the way Gambling has been redefined in the present day, these notes were always going to be controversial - and more so because 'Gambling' clearly lies, in one form or another, at the heart of man's experiences across nearly all social experiences.

To try and start by giving a definition of Gambling is tricky - believers tend to think of it as being when a person writes out a selection on a betting slip and pops in to their local Bookies to lay out some money for a return if their selection wins (with different applications now that most betting is done via the Internet).

But Gambling is better defined as being when a person speculates on an outcome by backing it up with their resources or their time, leaving the wide inclusiveness of that statement as it is, allowing it to refer to events and situations that, as the Church, we've thought acceptable while condemning others.

Introduction

As one who used to be a Betting Office Manager in my 'old life' and with first hand experience both of placing bets and of watching the characters who put bets on, I'm probably as qualified as any to make some brief comments on the subject of Gambling.

However, the main source from which any of us should seek to gain an understanding of any human phenomenon is the Scriptures. It always surprises me that believers think that a Bible Teacher must always have the 'experience' in order to effectively teach what the Bible has to say or what God wants - if we were to take that as a standard that we would unbendingly apply in each and every situation, we could only accept preachers and counsellors who have or who have once had AIDS, who have practiced homosexuality, who have slept around with as many men and women as they could, have robbed men and women repeatedly and so on.

But experience - although something that YHWH can use to enhance the teaching - is not necessary to teach what God has to say on a matter. Otherwise we would surely long since have discounted Jesus' words on both marriage and children, and observed cuttingly that, because He was the one Man who knew no sin (II Cor 5:21), He was unqualified to teach us about any matter that concerns it.

So, although I have experience, the basis of our comments must be the Bible.

I should also point out - as I previously did in my explanation of how I became a believer (www.arlev.clara.net/testimony.htm) - that conversion did not compel or force me to have to resign from my employment of being a Betting Office manager, even though my conscience troubled me. I knew inside that such an occupation seemed incompatible with being a believer but I was unsure just what I should do.

As I wrote on the web page (with some alterations):

Being zealous for the Lord, I wanted to leave [the Betting Office] sometime during September/October of '82 and I remained convinced that I should just hand my notice in and allow God to look after me 'by faith'. My mother wasn't at all convinced, though, and I had a rather heated discussion with her at the end of which I went up to my bedroom, prayed and said to God

'Come on, tell me I can leave'

then opened the Bible and put my finger on the pages. I wouldn't recommend this to you at home to try but I was very young in the faith and didn't know much about the will and ways of God! The line that my finger fell on was a verse from Isaiah which simply read

'Believers will not be in haste'

It wasn't that the verse *could be* applied to my situation - but that it hit me like a sledge hammer right between the eyes and I felt weak. In the light of that, I decided not to leave and found myself at peace with the job (even though the leadership of the church seemed not to be).

During either '83 or '84 (I can't remember which), there was the 'Mission to London' with Luis

Palau - my betting office was probably the only shop that had stickers all around it proclaiming 'Come to QPR to hear Luis Palau!' I was possibly the first christian bookie in human history, but I was able to witness to the Lord before people who might never have heard that there was anything on - even though my witness was far from perfect.

I continued to study the Bible and attend what meetings I could and became a joint youth leader by '84 at the insistence of the youth leader who had always supported me against the decisions of the main leadership of the church.

But, one day, I went in to work and was hit by the question

'What am I doing here anymore?'

I chatted it over with my mum that evening - well, actually, that's not a correct statement. I really only told her what I was about to do. The following morning I handed my resignation in much to the amazement of my superiors - I don't think they'd ever had a reason given that matched mine.

'It's incompatible with me being a christian'

'But don't you have a job to go to?'

'No'

'Why don't you stay until you get another job?'

'Because I must leave now'

Must've been pretty weird for them to comprehend - but even that would have served as a witness that there were more important things in life than having paid employment.

I think it was August that I left - in September I was travelling round England working for a christian organisation.

Anyway, that was my employment sorted out.

I have known believers who have had the odd gamble on the horses on a Saturday, some who have had a gamble once a year on the Grand National (a British tradition), but the vast majority have shunned gambling (that is, anything to do with what goes on inside a Betting Office, along with buying lottery tickets, scratch cards, raffles and so on) insisting that it's a culpable sin but without being able to find a specific line of Scripture that forbids it (I picked up my old Thompson Chain Reference Bible this morning to see if the author had been able to put together a subject point commenting on the matter but it was somewhat conspicuous by its absence).

Lots

A NT Scripture is frighteningly contradictory to a 'no gambling' position because Peter suggests to the apostles and disciples that they should 'draw lots' to determine who among themselves was to take the position of the vacated ministry of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26). And it gets worse! 'They' (which can only mean that the believers present were of one mind) asked God to take part in their action by causing the right person to be selected.

We might, then, propose that gambling is only alright if God takes part in it along with us - that is, when the outcome of the matter is guaranteed to us by Him so that we're not so much gambling on a likelihood but resting securely on a certainty. The only trouble with this position is that God never says that He'll take part in the drawing of lots and those present assume that He will do.

Was this trust or presumption, then?

For that reason, some believers have refused to accept that the disciples in Acts Chapter 1 did what was right in God's eyes, going on to insist that Paul was really the new 'twelfth apostle' and that they should've waited for God's timing in the matter.

Whatever the exact truth (and it seems to me to be able to be called whichever way supports your own pet doctrine of gambling by adding or assuming little bits that aren't there in the text), the real 'facts' of the matter are that the disciples *did* draw lots (that is, they took a chance that their actions would bring about a provision for the Kingdom - that is, they gambled), they saw nothing wrong with it (indeed, they used some OT Scriptures to justify the course of action they were planning) and they even invited God to use it to bring about the purpose of His will!

The casting of lots is by no means unusual in Scripture and it appears to have been a way that men and women decided upon matters - whether in a purely random manner when they couldn't make up their own mind or with an appeal to a higher power who would so arrange the drawing of the lots that the deity's will would be done as a result of the decision arrived at.

Although there's nothing specifically stated in the procedures commanded surrounding the Day of Atonement (Leviticus Chapter 16), it would be difficult to imagine the drawing of lots over the two goats (that represented the one offering for sin - see my notes on www.arlev.clara.net/yomkippu.htm) as being anything

other than an appeal to YHWH to select the one He chose for each purpose (Lev 16:8-10).

And, again, when it came to the apportioning of the land between the twelve tribes in Canaan, the drawing of lots was used to determine who got what (Num 26:55). Wenham ('Numbers' by Gordon J Wenham in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, published by Inter-Varsity Press) notes here that

'The use of the lot to determine the distribution of land is attested in the Near East from pre-Mosaic to modern times'

so that we wouldn't be going too far if we saw God's command through Moses not as something new that He was instituting but a method they were already familiar with that He was using to bring about the purpose of His own will (the Medes and Persians clearly used the 'lot' method to determine favourable times at which to act - Esther 3:7, 9:24. The sailors on board ship with Jonah also drew lots to determine on whose account the trouble had come - Jonah 1:7). The lots were drawn in Joshua Chapter 15 onwards and it's not insignificant that the land that had yet to be conquered and apportioned is spoken of as having lots cast for it (Joshua 18:10 - my italics)

'...in Shiloh *before YHWH...*'

(see also Joshua 18:6,8). That is, lots were cast with the understanding that YHWH would control the outcome. This is backed up by Pr 16:33 that instructs us that

'The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from YHWH'

and Prov 18:18 comments that

'The lot puts an end to disputes and decides between powerful contenders'

because both parties are willing to let the decision be in the hand of One who's called upon in the drawing to determine the outcome. Put another way for the sake of our own godless society, we could render it

'An independent third party should be petitioned to decide upon a matter when two people can't come to an amicable agreement'

but, in ancient time, that third party was always a Deity, an unseen hand, who was assumed would manipulate the lot to bring about what was fitting and just.

Having said this, we must also note Num 26:56 (and Num 33:54) which commands that

'[The children of Israel's] inheritance shall be divided according to lot between the larger and the smaller'

That is, a large inheritance of land was to be given to a large tribe. Both considerations seem to have been incorporated into the apportioning of the land - the casting of lots to determine the will of YHWH but the logic of not allowing a small tribe to echo around a place far too big for them.

Before we look at the specific use of 'Urim and Thummim', there are a few other places in the OT where the drawing of lots are used to determine matters and I mention them here only briefly. That some of these were religious matters means that it's not beyond the possibility that the Urim and Thummim method was used (especially the determination of the Temple service where the High Priest would have been present) but, unless it states it specifically, we can't be certain.

Judges 20:9-11 echoes the Scripture that speaks about Israel going out to battle according to lot. Here, though, the idea is that a certain proportion of soldiers were to be taken by lot from each of the twelve tribes to make up a united army of Israel to go up to fight against Gibeah. I Sam 10:20-21 sees Samuel the prophet using lots to show the Israelites who the first king of Israel was to be. Samuel already knew who God's chosen was (I Sam 9:27-10:1) so the method employed seems to have been solely for the benefit of the Israelites.

I Chronicles Chapter 24 sees the Jews drawing lots for the division of the labour in the Temple amongst the descendants of Aaron when there was a disproportionate amount of descendants from one line over another. Chapter 25 sees lots being taken for the singers and 26:12-19 sees lots being taken for the gatekeepers. Luke 1:9 shows us that lots continued to be used during the first century in the Temple (or, perhaps more accurately, just before the start of it).

When the Jews returned to the land, lots were cast to determine who would bring the wood offering to the Temple (Neh 10:34) and who were to be compelled to live in Jerusalem (Neh 11:1).

Figuratively, the word used for the lot (Strong's Hebrew Number 1486) was also employed when no actual 'lot' had been taken to signify the 'fate' of a person or people. So David talks about YHWH holding his fate in His hands when he writes (Ps 16:5) that

'YHWH is my chosen portion and my cup; Thou holdest my lot'

the prophets also speaking about the 'lot' that's given to peoples where the assumption is made (if not specifically stated) that the determination is from YHWH (Is 7:14, 57:6, Jer 13:25) as if He's sat down to draw lots (see Is 34:17 where such phraseology is directly used). Simply, it's using contemporary language to make the point that there is One far more powerful who determines the fate of individuals and peoples.

Lots are cast specifically as a method of gambling in Prov 22:18 (fulfilled in Mtw 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34 and John 19:24) where a quantity of items are being apportioned out. The same idea of gambling seems to be underlying the observation of Job 6:27, Joel 3:3, Obadiah 11 and Nah 3:10. All these are used in an originally

negative sense as being something distasteful.

Finally, the word can also be used for self-determination (Prov 1:14) where 'sinners' try to entice men to 'Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse' where the fate of the corporate group is shared out to the individual.

Urim and Thummim

One of the ways that YHWH had provided for His will to be known was in the drawing of the Urim and the Thummim - a phrase that still remains a mystery to us, although the idea seems to be that they were some sort of stones or precious jewels that were kept in the Breastpiece of Judgment that the High Priest wore (Ex 28:30) and drawn out when a yes/no question was needing to be answered.

The example given to us is laid down in Num 27:21 where, speaking of Moses' successor, it's written that '...he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before YHWH; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation'

When we read of God commanding the Israelites to go out and attack a city or people (Joshua 8:1-9), the detailed discourse we have about the way to attack *may have been* the result of a series of questions put to the High Priest who drew the Urim and Thummim out from the Breastpiece. If this is the case, it must have taken a great deal of time to be sure as to what the details of the attack would be, but the logical inference from the commands in the Mosaic Law are just that (however we may balk at the likelihood of the matter).

The Israelites saw it *not* as an uncertain gamble but as way to determine the will of God.

The Urim and Thummim method of drawing lots was also used by others to determine matters - for example, by Saul (I Sam 14:41) and David (I Sam 30:7-8 - the Urim and Thummim are never mentioned here but it's the High Priest who's enquired of and it has something to do with the ephod that brings about God's will in the matter).

It's also interesting to note that Saul found there to be a time when God refused to give him a certain answer by the drawing of the lots (I Sam 28:6) so we may not be going too far to speculate that an answer given to a yes/no answer was asked again at least once to make sure the same answer was received and, therefore, that it was YHWH who was guiding the drawing hand of the High Priest (see also Ezra 2:63 and Neh 7:65 where the returning exiles used the drawing of lots to determine the will of God in matters that they were uncertain about).

Whether it's simply the mention of the drawing of lots independent of any other considerations, the determination of a course of action where God is assumed to be present or the specific matter of the Urim and Thummim, it's plain that the ancients used lots to decide on matters.

It became somewhat of a gamble, of course.

Did you believe that God would step in and look after your rights? Did you trust the person who you were drawing lots against not to manipulate the process? And what if the lottery gave you something that you were unwilling to accept? Did you go and do what you had planned to do regardless which, if you'd called God to determine the outcome, would be to go against the assumed will of God for you?

The drawing of lots, therefore, was a calculated gamble for the determination of a matter or a course of action.

But, if we are to be as faithful to the testimony of Scripture as we can, the principle for the believer is neither that 'Gambling' is right nor wrong but that, if a person is sure that God is in control of an event that has an outcome that is unknown to them, there is no condemnation for them to step out *in faith* and to rely on the result being the answer determined by God.

This is much more than claiming the way that situations around us transpire is 'the will of God' (to use a phrase that's often heard in our society and which stands for the humanistic statement that 'whatever will be, will be') regardless of whether God really is in the matter or not. The principle requires that the individual be sure that God *is* in a matter and for them to be certain that whatever the answer to their problem, question or situation *will be* the solution that has come direct from the presence of God.

This doesn't mean that the answer will be what the individual wanted but that it will be accepted as being God's will.

God's Provision

We often think about gambling in the context of monetary gain - and indeed we can. But we have already seen above that gambling through the drawing of lots was used to determine God's provision in a man who was

needed to advance the Kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:15-26).

We shall look primarily at financial provision here and, even when the Scriptures make no specific mention of 'money' (the concept of money is a modern one, btw, where hoards of gold are offset against little pieces of paper and coins of metal that represent the valuable metal that's protected elsewhere), our minds may well stray onto such matters - our society seems to be so entrenched in the intrinsic value of the pound or the dollar that we forget that they don't actually have any *real* worth.

When Worksop was cut off by blizzards when we lived there back in the eighties, men and women discovered just how worthless such pieces of paper and metal were when they waved increasing amounts in front of sales assistants to buy something from them that didn't exist in the shops because the stock had run out and supply was cut off.

They may have been able to barter with people who owned the objects they required, but their money was worthless - it had lost all considered value.

So, as we deal with God's provision, we mustn't lose sight of the all-encompassing nature of this subject and how it applies to each and every area of need in an individual's and group's life.

Probably the most important Scripture that helps us determine a believer's position on the subject of gambling is Gen 22:14 that sits almost as a conclusion to the story of Abraham taking his son, Isaac, at the command of YHWH to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah where the Temple was to be built centuries later. The text (my italics) relates to us that

'...Abraham called the name of that place "YHWH *will provide*"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of YHWH it *shall be provided*"...'

the use of which is paralleled in Ps 84:7 (my italics) which comments at the conclusion of a prophetic passage concerning the cross and resurrection that

'...the God of gods *will be seen* in Zion'

The words italicised are a poor representation of a Hebrew word (Strongs Hebrew number 7200, M2095) that's difficult to translate in an economy of words (as translators are wont to try) for there isn't *just* PRO-vision indicated in the word but PRE-vision - that is, in order for God to 'come up with the goods', He must be operating in His omniscience to see the need ahead of time and to provide for it.

The Hebrew word primarily gives the concept of vision - that is, something or someone is seeing - but the secondary meaning which is developed from this insight is provision and it's difficult to understand either one or the other having to stand alone without a dependency upon the other. When it's used of God with the sense of provision being given to man, there's a foreknowledge that's being employed that brings about the realisation of what's needed.

In the case of Gen 22:14, that pre-vision was that the outcome of Abraham's freewill was that he wouldn't be unwilling to sacrifice his son as an offering and, therefore, to cause a ram to get caught in a thicket as a substitute for his son (Gen 22:13) - the pro-vision. Abraham isn't simply saying that God saw His need and provided for it but that He knew what that need was to be ahead of time and took steps to have the provision ready at the split second that it was required.

In Ps 84:7, the meaning would be better given that

'the God of gods will see the need [for the transforming influence to occur] and provide for that need in His people [Zion]...'

by the way of the cross, the resurrection and the ascension (see on www.arlev.clara.net/succoth.htm under Section 3ii entitled 'Simchat Beth ha-She'ubah' for a full treatment of the passage and how it relates to Jesus' words in the Temple).

When we take this and apply it to the subject of drawing lots and of gambling in general, we must see that a provision of need is simply (!) the result of God foreseeing the situation that's to arise and taking steps beforehand to meet it. So, if we take Acts 1:15-26 as our example, we could say that God had already provided a replacement for Judas Iscariot before lots were drawn (by making him ready and able at that time to stand in his place) and that the selection process was simply the way God made His provision known.

Our eyes, therefore, are taken away from the method that was employed by His followers and thrown onto God's action in making someone available to fill the need. The truth is, they could've used any method they deemed to be acceptable to God but *in the end* they chose the convenience of drawing lots *that had to give an answer*.

The problem, however, was that, if God was *not* with them, they were going to appoint a person to leadership regardless of his suitability. That's the problem with all forms of gambling, of course - if God isn't in the process, the result is never likely to be a true reflection of the will of God.

Sometimes, the trouble is that we see a need that we think must be met but God sees no such thing - so our request fails to be answered. Then we can go and try to meet the need ourselves and, although we may do

just that, we fail to experience the anointing that comes through God's will being done.

I hate to say it, but the need to have appointed leadership has often been a stumbling block to the Church for, when leaders move on, outside leaders are often sought rather than believers looking within the fellowship to see if God has provided amongst His own (and as you would *expect* Him to do!). It would be extremely unusual *in the context of the NT* for God to allow a fellowship to continue if He didn't intend raising men and women up to meet its needs - but many of our fellowships *do* stumble on ineffectively because we've chosen a method of choosing a new leader *that will give us someone regardless* when God isn't in the method.

Financial provision can also fall nicely into this slot. Do we need money? Then, although we may try to win 'the big one' each week, why do we never succeed? Either the method is not the way God has chosen to meet our need or else God sees no such need and isn't going to do what we require of Him.

We very often expect God to get in step with the way we call a matter, forgetting that, in Christ, it's us who have to get in step with God. Sometimes, the lack of a provision that we perceive is actually an opportunity for us to be changed to be more like Jesus in the situation - receiving deliverance *in* the situation and not *out of* the situation.

Our Western mindset sees poverty (or, lack of financial provision) as a curse from God while wealth is evidence of the possessor being God's special son - we often forget that being poor is a great opportunity for the rich to make themselves poor in order that the poor become rich, in the same way as Jesus chose to make Himself poor on earth that by His death and resurrection, mankind might also lay hold of the treasures of God.

What should be covered by the word 'Gambling'?

I've been asked on a few occasions why I don't play the lottery regularly and my reply is that I want God to give me the numbers first - I'd have no trouble with my conscience if God gave me the right numbers for the week's draw (but I'd certainly need some specific details to tell me just what I was supposed to do with all the money).

I have no trouble believing that God could provide for me in this way - but I do have difficulty accepting that I should try and provide *for myself* in a similar manner. Of course, the word 'gambling' is a strange one and one could equally use the label for trading on the stock exchange or taking a risk with investments in banks and building societies even though it normally means going into a Betting Office and putting a bet on a horse, greyhound, soccer match and so on.

The point in all these things, though, is who's being looked to as Provider - and being responsible for the money that's committed into our hands. I would have to think carefully about the normal attitude that would frown upon a person who puts a one pound bet annually on the Grand National but which sees nothing wrong in wasting hundreds on 'keeping up with fashion' or of getting the latest technological advances when what is owned is perfectly adequate.

Indeed, leaving addiction aside for a moment (I'll deal with this subject below), what's the difference between a believer spending a one-off £5 on an afternoon's entertainment on horse racing (for example, on the annual Grand National Saturday) while another believer spends £30 to go to a 'once a season' football match because they've got through to the semi-final of the FA Cup?

Personally, I see no real difference - except that financing the latter is more of a drain on a person's resources and the former is not culturally acceptable in the Church. Both these fall into the area of 'Entertainment', something that the Bible is fairly silent on but which we've elevated into a major need of Western men and women.

Suggest to a believer that they should consider not having a holiday but, rather, they should invest the money that would've been spent on it on advancing the message of the Gospel and many of the old clichés will come out - 'God knows that I need a break', 'God doesn't mind that we spend that money on ourselves' and 'It's only a bit of fun'. The same men and women will look down their noses on someone who has a £5 bet on the Grand National once a year but who can't afford to go away on holiday - but it's obvious who's withholding the greatest amount of money from the proclamation of the Gospel.

And believers also love to decategorise specific forms of gambling that they take part in while condemning those who participate in those ways that they're free from.

In the UK, many believers were faced with a choice of mortgage when they came to buy a house - either a straight Repayment or a more complicated Endowment policy. The former simply paid back the interest and capital borrowed over a fixed period so that, at the end of the time period (often 20-25 years), the entire debt was paid off. Endowment agreements were a whole lot more of a problem for the borrower only paid off the interest that accrued on the loan - in addition, an investment was made that would, it was hoped, earn interest so that, at the end of the period of the loan, the pay out would be substantially more than the money borrowed, allowing the

borrower to pay off the lump sum and have a sizeable amount of money left.

It was a pure gamble, of course, for there were no guarantees - and, in recent years, these Endowment policies have been returning amounts that are substantially *less* than the amount of the loan. But many believers jumped into Endowment agreements with both feet, thinking that it was an ideal way to make a substantial amount of money very easily. And many of these people would condemn the annual £5 bet but justify their own multi-thousand pound gamble.

It could also be levelled at the Repayment mortgage that it's a gamble that the borrower will have the provision to make the repayments each month for the next 25 years!

In like manner, the storage of monetary resources is open to risk - one may feel that a bank is 'as safe as houses' but there are investment opportunities in the form of higher interest rate accounts that, because of their very nature, represent a substantially increased risk of losing one's investment and of tying one's money up so that it can't be easily and quickly used in doing God's will. It wasn't too long ago that the occasional Building Society went bankrupt with those people who were storing their money with them losing everything in the crash.

But the risks were known - leaving financial provision with *any* institution or firm is a calculated gamble and one that's accepted as being risk taking (although it has a better record of a return than putting money on a horse race!).

And we could go on to list Stock Trading or Business Investments in one's own company - the point is that believers think nothing of gambling in some fairly major ways but then refuse to accept that their condemnation of gambling in others actually encompasses their own actions.

Would God use a gambling method to provide for His people?

The evidence of Acts 1:15-26 that we discussed above would already give us the answer 'yes' to this question. There's no escaping the fact that God allows His followers to use chance to determine what His will is for their lives and that *He's even willing to take part in the process and manipulate the method so that His will is done.*

It doesn't mean that, if a believer gambles, the outcome is necessarily God's will (the same as using the methodology of the laying on of hands doesn't guarantee a person being healed) but that God doesn't find it a problem to work within a gambling format to bring about His will.

I've also heard it said by believers that God would never use a worldly source or means in order to bring provision to His people - that is, the Lottery belongs to secular, unsaved society and He won't take that money and hand it over to the saved by giving them the six winning numbers of the weekly draw (if someone was to win the lottery, therefore, it would either have to be the result of random chance or the work of Satan).

But God *did* provide for His people by despoiling their and His enemies (for example, in the flight from Egypt - Ex 12:35-36 - and in the provision for Jacob against Laban - Gen 31:1-13) - so the argument that God would never provide for His people through the provision of, for example, your local bookie or the National Lottery is clearly against Scripture.

God will choose whichever method He deems appropriate in order to meet the need of His people.

Can the believer have the odd gamble?

Even though we've dealt with so many different aspects above, the answer to this question is by no means an easy one to give because we've identified 'Gambling' in a few areas that have formerly been off-limits to the classification.

To name one, the mortgage (where a large sum is borrowed over an extensive time period to purchase a house) seems to be an integral part of Britain's culture and a necessary part of securing accommodation in today's society. But some leaders preach from the pulpit that believers should never be in debt *if they have faith*, the inference being that debtors aren't in God's will and are sometimes roundly condemned as lacking faith! These same preachers have either taken mortgages out or, because they're given a church-owned Manse to live in, have never needed to earn a real living and make provision to have a roof over their heads (am I cynical or what?).

The underlying concern here, though, could be taken to be 'need'. Is there a need for a believer to take a calculated risk with financial resources or material possessions? And does that risk hinder the advance of the Kingdom of God or give a foundation from which it can be encouraged?

Personally, I would argue that a mortgage should give provision for the Gospel to be advanced because it generally provides a secure place from which the lost of the area can be reached. Certainly, without a house, I could never have found time to provide teaching notes for the Church. Others may have a different opinion, of

course.

But the areas that are normally condemned within the Church are those that take place in Betting Offices the length and breadth of the country, on race courses, in newsagents where they sell National Lottery tickets and scratch cards and even at work in sweepstakes and raffles.

There are two, perhaps three, considerations to be made in order to decide on these cases.

The first will need many to define their own concept of the word 'Entertainment' and how it applies to the believer. There's no doubt that the subject has become a large one within Western Society where we no longer struggle to survive and have free time on our hands that we want to fill up with 'things to do'.

Just how far should a believer go in his seeking out of 'Entertainment' to pass the time? If a believer does have spare time on his hands but doesn't have anything specific that comes to mind to do with regard the Gospel, should he be allowed to invest resources to dispel the boredom?

I have my own answer on the matter and don't intend sharing it here, but the reader will already have understood some of my gripes above as I've dealt with certain issues. Consistency is called for in this matter, and a person who condemns a one-off day out at the races that costs £150 should equally condemn a one-off day out at a football match that costs the same (I use these two examples because they're both well known to me and the prices I cite I can affirm as being accurate when travel, food, entrance fees, the purchase of programs are all added in).

It depends entirely how much one thinks personal resources can be used for personal entertainment that should give us the answer to the question and not the nature of either one (there *are* types of entertainment, of course, that are specifically spoken against in the Bible and these must always be avoided).

In the first example of the day out at the races, the assumption is made that no attempt has been made to get God to provide - it's simply an experience and a break from the mundane nature of a person's life.

But, when it comes to *gambling to make money for provision*, there are two questions to be asked - and both are simply different sides of the same coin.

Is God in it? Or is it our own chosen way to make more money?

Acts 1:15-26 testified to the willingness of God to take part in chance - where the outcome (if God wasn't present) would have been the appointment of the wrong man as one of the twelve. That was quite some gamble - it could've destroyed the advance of the Gospel.

But God appears to have been in it.

In the same way, is God in any type of mortgage? Is He in the loan you want to take out to buy a new car or to do a house improvement? If He is, there's no risk involved - if He isn't, the successful completion of the loan doesn't prove it was God's will.

And what of the Lottery ticket you want to buy? Or the horse you want to bet on? Is this a way God *will* provide for you or is it a way that you're trying to provide for yourself because you're not satisfied with the resources you have? To this question, the Scriptures comment clearly.

When asked by the Roman Soldiers what they were to do to please God, John the Baptist (Luke 3:14 - my italics) answered them that they were to

'Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and *be content with your wages*'

This idea of being satisfied with the lot that's been given to you by God is made plain by Paul (Phil 4:11) who observed that he refused to

'...complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content'

and the writer to the Hebrews (Heb 13:5) went on to command his readers and listeners to

'Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have...'

Finally, Paul, talking about being content with what meagre resources were made available and noting that he would be content with 'food and clothing' (1 Tim 6:6-10), went on to observe and warn Timothy that

'...those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is [a] root of all [kinds of evil]; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs'

Paul's warning here is to be heeded as the bottom line when it comes to gambling. Is our desire to gamble simply an outworking of our craving to have more? Are we discontented with what we have so we try and make more for ourselves through means that God has not chosen to provide for us?

And, to put it into an a specific example, did we take out an Endowment mortgage rather than a simple Repayment because we thought we'd make money by our own shrewdness? If we did, the problem is *not* that we gambled but that we have a love of money that needs dealing with - or else it will be the root from which 'all kinds of evil' will spring and choke the implanted seed of the Word of the Gospel.

So, in summary, when it comes to finding something to be entertained with, gambling is not a problem (so long as it's infrequent and doesn't put in jeopardy the resource for the preaching of the Gospel). But, when it

comes to using gambling as a means of provision, it can only be justified in God's eyes if it's His chosen way to give provision to His people (and you kind of know if it *is* His provision cos it usually works!)

Nature Of Life

Although far from a perfect definition, my own idea of what should be discussed as what takes place in Gambling is this:

The commitment of personal time and/or resources in order for there to be an outcome that is favourable to the person investing the time and/or resources.

The main reason why 'Gambling' isn't forbidden in the Law or by a clear inference in the Scriptures is because it's a characteristic that's been sown into the very fabric of the created order and of man's existence in the world.

That will come as a shock to most readers and will be tantamount to me saying that God likes the odd gamble - that, because Creation reflects His nature, God is being labelled a Gambler and, therefore, expects His children to take after Him. It would be a charge that wouldn't stop until it pointed out that men and women are sinners and, therefore, God must be a Sinner Himself!

But we should consider carefully not only the plight of mankind but of the experience of the Natural World.

When a sparrow needs food, it decides where it thinks the best place is to find some - it gambles on a place and, usually, that means our bird table. It could choose one of many locations and, if Summer or if it has young ones to feed, it will probably shun our table and head somewhere that it thinks it may find softer food.

But its choices are, nevertheless, a gamble. It may get it wrong and go hungry - if it gets it consistently wrong it will starve to death. Generally speaking, though, they tend to get it right.

Similarly, when it has an option of half a dozen trees and bushes in which to roost overnight, it chooses one that it decides will be the safest and takes the chance based on its assessment of each option. That, too, is a gamble and one that, if it gets it wrong, will see a predator gain access to the roost and eat it.

Men and women also have those choices to make in life - although most of mankind's decisions in the West are based upon monetary considerations.

Parents will decide which area they consider to be the safest for their children - whether by a comparison of Crime Rates, the presence of a major road outside their front door where three year old Johnny will wander on to when they leave him unsupervised or even by recourse to a register of convicted paedophiles. In the end, it's a gamble based upon the available evidence that will cause them to choose one location over another.

Choosing a school for their children is also a choice made from considerations, a gamble of circumstance and fact. Changing employers gambles on the new company having better prospects than the previous but, should that be miscalculated, redundancy can result with a loss of earnings and, ultimately, a repossession of the home if payments cannot be continued on a mortgage.

The mortgage itself is a gamble based upon the reliability of funds to meet the monthly repayments over the course of a long period of time. Depositing money in banks and investment plans are based upon the chosen company being careful not to become bankrupt and to refuse to reimburse its investors with their finance (something that men and women in the West are only beginning to make a prime consideration following a period of recession).

Even marriage and relationships are a gamble based on the evidence available. Does a person trust their neighbour not to use the spare key that's been left with them to come into their house while away and steal their possessions? Do we trust our friends not to repeat our heartfelt confessions to people who would do us harm or embarrass us?

Even a believer's faith in the sufficiency of the cross, resurrection and ascension is a gamble for the believer has decided where their trust lies and is, hopefully, putting their time and resources behind that belief in its outworking both in and through them. If we're wrong, our lives are lost - if we're right, the return on our investment is unbelievably good.

Life is a gamble, then, its nature has been sown into the fabric of the created order.

Therefore, Jesus is not ashamed to speak of His return in a parable that has, at its heart, investment, risk and gambling (Mtw 25:14-30). The element of risk isn't present in this parable and the expectation that investment will always bring an increase or that bank deposits necessarily produce a reward where the capital is safe, is a necessary assumption so that the parable can yield a simple truth necessary to Jesus' purpose.

However, that Jesus uses an example from the world of investment and risk shows that He isn't afraid to draw from life examples that have something to say to the believer about the Kingdom.

It does *not*, of course, justify gambling and shouldn't be made to do so, but it does show us that using one's resources to achieve an increase is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a believer and that there are

types of gambling, investment and risk (call it what you will) that are a necessary part of the follower of Christ's life.

'Gambling' must never be thought of in narrow terms that justify parts of our lives while condemning the trait in others. Rather, we must realise that 'Life is Gambling', that in order to live, we must gamble on a daily basis.

It's the *nature* of the gambling that we take part in, the reason behind our actions and the justified or unnecessary risk involved that determines whether we should be taking part in it. Therefore, there can be no hard and fast law in the Church that Gambling is wrong and culpable for, if there was, no person on earth could ever stand before God with clean hands and a pure heart.

Gambling Addictions

That some people get addicted to gambling is beyond question. Whether it's to excessive betting beyond their means or to the repetitive small bet, the point is still the same - gambling can be a stumbling block that destroys men and women.

In that sense, it's just like many other experiences in both believers' and non-believers' lives - sex and alcohol are both good servants but make bad masters and many people have become enslaved to either and both. But these perennial objects of stumbling aren't the be-all-and-end-all that many make them out to be.

Some believers are enslaved to one denomination, undermining the 'salvation' of others by their strict traditional adherence to the doctrines of the men of their own particular sect. Still others find themselves enslaved to have to run after every 'big speaker' who holds a meeting close by or to go forward at every appeal that's made in anticipation of receiving in prayer something that they never do.

Addiction is certainly a subject that needs treatment on its own but, like gambling, we often stop short of naming our own particular addiction in our list of 'sins' while condemning some that we see in others that we've managed to steer clear of.

Many have sought to ban the temptation to sin (that is, prohibition) rather than to see that the real need is for men and women to be changed within by the work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth (conversion) *but*, if possible, the removal of the temptation *for the believer*, is necessary if there's still a weakness that might be exploited by a lack of self-control.

Paul isn't condemnatory of the weak brother who stumbles through something that isn't in itself a sin, but he is angry that a strong brother who participates in it makes shipwreck of the faith of others by their own tastes and choices (Romans 14:1-15:7 - see my notes on the subject on www.arlev.clara.net/lev034.htm).

In that way, everything we do must be looked at from a different perspective - not just gambling.

Therefore, it's much better that a believer stays well clear of gambling than to find either that they stumble another believer into an addiction or that they get entangled themselves in wasting resources that are better invested in advancing the Kingdom (but, there again, we could equally well apply this paragraph to taking holidays!).

Conclusion

I have made conclusions throughout this brief consideration of the subject of 'Gambling' and I don't intend repeating them here. But as the Bible gives examples in its pages of when God allowed Himself to be 'in the gamble' to declare His will to His people, we would do better than to condemn the matter out of hand.

