Column – happenchance vs. providence

Over the years, I have known people – yes, some in the ordained ministry -- who professed to be agnostics concerning one or more statements found in the Christian creed, including the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Agnostic, of course, means being uncertain, taking a sitting on the fence stance.

If they can be agnostic about things I consider central and unnegotiable, I can be agnostic about a concept so common we hardly give it any thought. I am thinking of "happenchance." By it we mean random happenings . . . but is there really such a thing, or is there a better explanation, a better word for it?

I think there is. That word is "providence." It carries with it the belief that God is sovereign over all things, that there are no random happenings, at least over which the great God of the universe is unable to overrule for good. Paul in Ephesains 1:11 says as much: the Sovereign Lord "worketh all things according to the counsel of his will."

That is providence. It does not mean that humans are puppets with the Almighty pulling strings from above. No, the choices and actions of humans are real, but, because God is a big God, He is able to take even bad ones and happenings which appear to be flukes and bring some greater good out of them.

This past week I came across the story of a fluke becoming a life-changing event. It took place when a Swedish journalist, a professed atheist, got on the wrong boat while on a trip to the Holy Land. Ingrid Carlqvist was her name.

The boat Mrs. Carlqvist boarded, along with a companion, was to cross the Sea of Galilee. The one on which they were booked was for secular tourists. The one they found themselves on was a Christian-based one.

As the latter pulled away from the shore, these Christians began singing hymns. Then a clergyman stood up and shared the story of Jesus walking on the water and how Peter jumped overboard to join Him. At first, things went well, then he took eyes off

Jesus and looked down. It was then Peter began to sink.

As the minister spoke about Peter losing faith and Jesus asking, “Why did you doubt?” Ingrid says something broke inside her. She began crying and felt this question was directed to her. As the sun rising in the morning dispels the darkness of night, so did the light of the Gospel dispel her unbelief. After returning home, this former atheist boldly confessed Christ and was baptized.

Getting off the boat, she apologized to the clergyman-tour guide for getting on the wrong boat. His response was reassuring: “You did not get on the wrong boat; you got on the right boat.”

Happenchance or providence? I’ll let you decide.

LORD, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities, and devoutly given to serve thee in good works, to the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. (Collect for 21st Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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