

2019 SERMON - ST MARK'S OPENING SERVICE

+ In the name of God; Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Former queen of daytime TV, Oprah Winfrey, once said, “The biggest adventure you can have in life is to follow your dreams.” I’m sure she’s right ... but the trouble is, life’s circumstances all too often present obstacles which conspire to flush our dreams away ... a fact I was reminded of in a rather unusual manner just recently.

Ellie and I were travelling in England in one of Sir Richard Branson’s Virgin trains when I had to go to the bathroom. [*Nothing unusual in that of course!*] But once closeted in that malodorous space, I was rivetted by the instruction on how to flush! “As well as the usual suspects,” the sign said, “please do not flush down this toilet ... old phones ... unpaid bills ... junk mail ... your ex’s sweater ... goldfish ... or your hopes and dreams.”

No doubt such quirky signage helps preserve the train’s plumbing. But hopes and dreams? I know modern CEOs are into moral platforming, so I took it as a subliminal nudge from a man famous for dreaming big [*think Virgin Galactic!*]. Whatever your dream is, don’t jettison it ... don’t let obstacles get in the way.

Exactly what constitutes your dream, is of course, unique to you. And every dream has a genesis, whether one recognises it or not. For me it’s easy. As an 8-year old in church, I pointed to the minister in his pulpit one Sunday morning and blurted out, “That’s what I’m going to be when I grow up!”

Others, of course, can only recognise the moment in retrospect. As a nineteen-year-old student at Oxford, J. R. R. Tolkien borrowed a most unlikely book from the library ... *A Finnish Grammar* by Sir Charles Eliot. Subsequently, he became intoxicated with the Finnish language, likening it to the discovery of a wine cellar stocked with an exquisite new vintage. Using Finnish elements, Tolkien went on to create his famed mythological world ... Middle-earth! But he wouldn’t have foreseen that on November 25th, 1911, the day he borrowed *A Finnish Grammar*.

But regardless of genesis, it’s the moment you confide your dream to others that you risk the prime obstacle to its fruition. Their negative opinions. Often of those you love most. Some of whom had their own plans for you. Look at Joseph in the reading Evie shared with us. Admittedly, rather bizarre, but as subsequent events proved [*and we don’t have time to go into the fascinating story*], Joseph’s dream was God-given. His parents and brothers certainly didn’t see it that way though ... in fact it would be many decades, and much heartache and sorrow later, before they did.

Sometime after our memorable train ride, Ellie and I were sitting in a café. On the wall above us was this sign: “Don’t just follow your dreams ... chase them!” The idea is that the momentum created will help you clear the inevitable obstacles ahead. Now in Psalm 23 there’s a line: *Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life*. What’s interesting is that the Hebrew word for “follow” is a hunting term and it can just as easily be

translated “chase” ... the inference being that no matter how far or how long you run away from God, his goodness and mercy will chase you.

If your dream is as precious to you as you are to God, then you have little option. Chase it you must. Don't be the dreamer that never arrives at their destiny. And in the process, accept that a dream needs an action plan or it's just wishful thinking. It's virtually impossible to overestimate the perseverance needed for your dream to succeed. Pablo Cassals, perhaps the greatest cellist of all time, was still practising three hours a day at age 96. When someone asked why, he said, “I'm beginning to notice some improvement.”

And of course, there's always the temptation of moral short-cuts! Not every dream job is above board. Outside England's Bristol Zoo, there's a carpark which was run by a solitary attendant. One day the attendant simply stopped coming to work. When the Zoo's admin asked the City Council for a replacement, they fired back that the attendant had never been on their payroll. Meanwhile, sitting somewhere in his sunny Mediterranean villa, was a man who'd installed a ticket machine off his own bat then showed up dutifully to collect the fees ... 500 pounds a day ... for 25 years!

Is it an urban myth? Quite possibly! But there must be some basis in reality because last week in Manchester, Ellie and I passed a carpark with a big sign saying: CUSTOMERS BEWARE. Do NOT pay the parking attendant. Would you want a dream job with the potential to land you in gaol ... or worse, in trouble with God on Judgement Day?

Perhaps the biggest obstacle of all though, is this: the temptation to give up on your dream because things aren't going according to your preconceived timetable. There may be unanticipated delays, unavoidable detours, which require the chase to be temporarily abandoned. But to dream big, you have to think long.

It was forty-three years after he borrowed *A Finnish Grammar*, that Tolkien finally published *The Lord of the Rings*, the second best-selling novel of all time. [*Its prequel, The Hobbit, ranks third.*] And just five years ago the Archbishop finally ordained me as a priest on these very steps. It's taken me a very long time to grow up!

In first century Israel there was a saying [*we heard it in the Dean's reading*], “It's still four months until harvest.” But Jesus rebuked it. “I tell you,” he said, “open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.” In other words, there's plenty that God has for you to do while waiting for your dream to come to fruition.

In closing I must mention the email I received from my uni the other day encouraging me to re-enrol. “Hi Grant,” it said, “when it comes to chasing your dreams, there's no better time than the present.” Whether they checked my age profile before hitting “send,” I'm not sure. But I do heartily endorse their sentiments.

May God bless you all and may each day this year bring you one step closer to realising your dream.

Amen.