

FOCUS ON FAITH

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VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

I was reminded earlier this month that it was said of Christopher Columbus that when he set off on his first expeditionary journey he didn't know where he was going; that when he got there, he didn't know where he was and when he returned home, he didn't really know where he had been.

Whilst there may be an element of truth in the statement, I think that it's a trifle harsh. Columbus was hoping to find a convenient maritime route from Europe to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic. The traditional land-based route eastward was arduous, time-consuming and fraught with danger. Columbus and his backers wanted to gain an advantage on their competitors by reducing the time taken for the return journey. Even back in the late 15th Century, entrepreneurs were looking for ingenious ways of reducing transportation costs. Unfortunately Columbus was mistaken on at least two counts.

The first problem was that he under-estimated the size of the globe. It may have been that in trying to secure financial backing for his ambitious scheme that he conveniently misinterpreted or miscalculated the distances involved. Secondly, he mistakenly thought (like many of his contemporaries) that there was a clear expanse of water from Europe going westwards that would eventually lead him to his destination. Of course there were no reliable charts or maps he could consult and in those days there was no GPS facility. Neither could he install a Satnav unit to help him. He went in hope and expectation probably with a high degree of fear and concern as to whether or not he would be able to return home.

Now I'm not extolling the virtues of Columbus – he was no saint and much of his treatment of the indigenous people he encountered was reprehensible and barbaric. But although he didn't succeed in achieving his original objective, on his first journey and the subsequent three further expeditions to the New World, Columbus helped open up new trade routes. Like other famous seafaring explorers such as Cabot, Vasco da Gama, Magellan and Cook, he dared to go whilst others only talked about it.

Someone once quipped that there are three types of people – those who make things happen, those who watch what happens and those who say, "What happened?" But for all of us life is a voyage of discovery.

From the moment we are born we begin to experience new challenges and learning opportunities. But thankfully whilst we have to face these ourselves, in

the majority of cases we have the experiences of others who have gone before us and the security of people around us.

Many of us can probably remember the first time we tried to ride a bike with a parent or friend holding the seat running alongside us as we wobbled our way down the street trying to find that elusive point of balance. We were encouraged to persevere even though there were numerous crashes and tears from the resulting scraped knees and hands. But eventually we made it and probably some of us have gone on to help our children learn the same skill and thrill of cycling.

So where does God and faith fit into this?

The Bible tells us that God knew us before we were born (see Psalm 139) and that He determines the time set for each of us and the exact places in which we will live (see Acts 17: 26). He knew you would be here in the Bridgnorth community today; that I would write, the Journal would publish and

you would read this article. I'm not saying God controls and manipulates everything we do – we have the ability to make good and bad choices – but He does know how our lives are going to turn out.

Not all of us will be internationally remembered for our exploits, inventions and achievements. Sadly some people are remembered not for the good they have brought to mankind but for their greed, naked ambition and in some cases, their destructive evil actions. But we all have the chance to learn from the past (even through our own successes and failures) and chart a course for the present and the future that brings positive benefits to people around us.

In 2008 we will all face new horizons as we continue on our voyages of discovery. Some of us will be presented with momentous challenges in relationships, work, health and a host of other issues. Not all our plans, hopes and dreams will turn out the way we intended; there will be (for us) uncharted waters to navigate and disappointments will no doubt arise along the way.

But let's remember that whatever the challenges each day brings, God knows the destination, as well as the route, and if we invite Him to, He will go with us.

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If you'd like to find out more about what Christians believe, log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk where you'll find information on local Churches together with contact details, plus information on activities and other resources.