

## The Route Master

At the beginning of a new year many of us will be looking back at what has happened over the last twelve months and reflecting upon the hopes and fears we have for the future. It is a profoundly spiritual exercise, especially for Christians. God is the Lord of History, the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 1:8). Our past and future lie in his hands and he is calling us to seek his purpose for the world and embrace our God-given destiny.

But as we look back over all that has happened in recent months, at the Brexit vote to leave the European Union, for example, the election of Donald Trump to be President of the United States, or the heightened tensions between the Super Powers, our thoughts and feelings will inevitably be mixed! There will be some events which we will want to celebrate, and others which we will recall with horror and dismay. It will certainly not be a clear-cut tale of good triumphing over evil. So how do we discern God's purpose in it all?

Christians often assume that if God has a plan, he will stick to it rigidly and maintain complete control over everything that happens. But if this were the case, then creatures like you and me would have to behave like trams running along pre-determined tram-lines, and any tragedy would have to be seen as having positively been willed by God for some good reason.

A growing number of modern theologians reject such a view. Life for them is much messier than that. They point to God's love being revealed supremely in the One who was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn (Luke 2:7) and who was killed by his enemies on a cross. God as he is encountered in Jesus does not impose his will by force. He is vulnerable and works out his purpose in a much gentler and more flexible way. When bad things happen or when we make wrong choices, it is not necessarily the result of his '*active will*' (what he positively wants) but of his '*permissive will*' (what he must reluctantly allow).

He is perhaps a little like one of those 'sat. nav's' (satellite navigation systems) which many of us use in our cars these days:

'In one hundred yards turn right', it will tell us in a calm, gentle and infinitely patient voice, or 'At the next roundabout take the second exit ...'

We may sometimes ignore its instructions or accidentally miss our turning, but if we do so, it simply adjusts its plan and revises its instructions:

'Turn around when possible', it will say.

It never loses its temper or abandons us as a lost cause; it perseveres *ad infinitum*, always trying, gently and calmly, to put us back on the right track and direct us towards our destination.

God is a little like a 'sat. nav'. He is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love" as the psalmist puts it (Psalm 145:8). If we have taken a wrong turn over the last twelve months, we need not despair. He loves us and will never give up on us. He will simply call us at the start of this New Year to celebrate all that has gone well, honestly admit where we may have gone wrong, and seek afresh, in his strength, to embrace his vision for the future.