

**2 or 3**: A sermon for Sunday 7 September 2008

by David Wilbourne

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst.

Following this service Ben and I  
will take communion  
to six homes,  
each home containing one or two housebound people,  
gathered together in His name.

When I first began doing home communions  
28 years ago,  
I used to finish my round in a state of severe shock,  
and had to lie down and wrap myself  
in my eiderdown for comfort,

or binge on dolphin-sized fish and chips.

The shock was really to do with  
the grinding of gears between two very different worlds.  
One world was Cambridge  
where I had studied liturgy and church history  
and had developed a good sense  
of the infinite breadth and depth  
of communion  
and all the many marvellous ways it could fuel and feed  
the spiritual imagination.  
A fuelling and feeding which often had an immense cost.  
Even comparatively recently many had died  
absolutely horrible deaths  
for what they believed the Eucharistic bread and wine  
stood for.

Many believed and still believe  
that the consecrated bread and wine  
was the actual body and blood of Christ,  
so a priest going out and about  
with the reserved sacrament in his briefcase  
was actually transporting God  
in all his terrible immenseness.

On Wednesday deep under the alps  
they are going to try and recreate  
the first milliseconds after the Big Bang.  
Every Wednesday as I took out communion  
I had the creator of the Big Bang  
safely enclosed  
in a little silver pyx.

And that was and is awesome.

There's a tale that when Martin Luther

had broken with Rome,  
and had rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation,  
he celebrated a simple Lord's Supper.

But at the administration he dropped the consecrated bread,  
and he nor anyone else dare pick it up  
because they were so terrified.

As we should be terrified as we taste  
the maker of the stars and sky  
on our tongues.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst.

That was the world I was coming from.

But the world of my home communicants  
was a very different world,  
not so much poles apart,

as black holes apart.

I have administered home communions

in at least seven different parishes,

yet all of them have had in common the Ringtons teaman.

Whatever the place,

whatever the time,

whenever I celebrate communion in the home,

the Ringtons teaman always pops up in the midst.

With his cheery basket,

and special offers on Yorkshire tea

and digestive biscuits,

he must gladden many a pensioner's day.

He doesn't gladden mine

the dominical words

with his

'A quarter of tea, love?'

And what makes it worse is that my communicant

always lifts their head bowed in

what I thought was reverent prayer

and responds,

'Ay, and I'll have some of them currant biscuits

if you've got any with you.'

Of course,

the Ringtons teaman can't take all the credit

for shocking me out of my Oxbridge complacency.

I have also competed with hairdressers

'Can't you give it her under the dryer, luv'

nurses,

'She's just having a bath at the moment,

can you give it her in there?'

or

'He's just on the commode,  
but I'll put a rug over him  
and don't worry,  
nothing will happen for hours yet.  
I declined the invitation to give communion  
under the dryer  
or in the bath;  
I unwisely carried on regardless of the commode,  
blissfully unaware until it was too late  
of the laxative powers  
of even the prospect of the sacrament.  
I think the most bizarre  
was when I gave communion to an old lady  
whilst her middle-aged son  
was out in the garden burying the cat,  
which judging from the sounds

which would make even the most novice violin player squirm  
wasn't quite dead.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst.

I was utterly shocked with shame  
that I was taking our Lord into such irreligious situations.

Over the years though  
it dawned on precious old me  
that our Lord who was born in a stable and died on a gibbet  
wasn't fussy,  
wasn't choosy  
about the situations he popped up in.

The Lord of heaven and earth,  
of bread and wine  
was also the Lord of the Ringtons teaman

and the nurse

and the hairdresser

and even the cat-killer.

As the years went by

I moved from being shocked and frustrated

by the interruptions

to see God himself in them,

God himself

in the nurse and the hairdresser and the Ringtons teaman,

my extended congregation,

God in his sacrament not being huffy with them,

but giving dignity to them.

Although I probably have to draw the line

at the cat-killer.

I suppose I moved from seeing the sacrament

as taking God to people

to seeing the sacrament as catalyst,

or a lens

which allowed me to see God in people

in all his surprising manifestations.

When an aged communicant's sister

rings her up

at the precise point she is chewing the bread,

and her face lights up with joy,

aren't the angels singing in heaven at that moment?

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,

there am I in the midst.

Over 28 years

I've had some marvellous home communicants,

though many have passed on,

they all still fill my dreams,  
my dreams not my nightmares.  
Sometimes on a Wednesday  
when I'm on automatic pilot  
I find myself parking my bike  
at homes where the communicant  
has long since passed on,  
a ghostly communion round.  
One lady,  
who died just before this last early Easter,  
I had taken communion to  
every fortnight for ten years.  
Over 250 times I had read the Gospel,  
parables of good Samaritans tending wounded Jews,  
parables of prodigal sons  
being welcomed by prodigal fathers,

year in year out  
Bartimeaus cried  
'Lord let me have my sight back'.  
year in year out  
the centurion declared,  
'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you under my roof,  
but only say the word and your servant shall be healed.'  
My record-breaking communicant  
was by no means an easy person:  
on my first visit to her  
she gave me a right telling off for being late –  
most housebound people tend to be  
perversely fussy about punctuality –  
yet in time I rejoiced over someone  
who rose above terrible bitter pain  
to be shaped by the Gospel.

One communion before she died

I was going on in the afternoon to Bishopthorpe,  
and I asked her what I should say to the archbishop.

I'd put the same question to some earlier communicants,  
who, like many old folk,  
reverted to a racial prejudice of a former age.

But not her.

'Tell him I think he's absolutely marvellous,  
because he stands up for the underdog,'  
she positively bellowed.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst.

Please pray for Ben and me as we tour our twos and threes,  
and the fourth invisible one in our midst.

After all this is God's own country.

I think of the words of that most marvellous

Archbishop of York,

Stuart Blanche.

For Jews before Jesus,

a synagogue could only be convened

if at least ten men were present.

But when our Lord said,

'Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst,'

I think it was North York Moor

congregations he had in mind!

God bless you, Ben,

on this your first home communion tour.

Prepare yourself to be shocked

by those thousands who'll receive communion from you

and from whom you will receive nothing less than God.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst.