

Sermon preached on All Saints Sunday by Canon David Wilbourne:

Jokes about Sarah Palin,

she who put the Alas in Alaska,

are coming thick and fast

on Terry Wogan's Breakfast Show

on the suddenly controversial Radio Two.

Where is she governor of?

Alaska?

Will you (I'll ask her!).

Or how about this

for something slightly more sophisticated:

A doctor in America was chatting about politics

with his farmer patient.

'Sarah Palin's a post-turtle!'

the farmer quipped.

'How do you mean?'

the doctor asked.

'Well, as you're driving along the highway,

you notice this high pole

with a turtle on top,

and you think:

1. That turtle didn't get there on its own accord.
2. Now it's up there,
it hasn't got a clue what it's supposed to do.
3. Which dumb ass put it up there in the first place?'

The post-turtle principle can be applied to All Saints.

Principle Number One.

No saint got to be a saint by their own accord.

The core Christian belief

is that we are saved by faith

not by merit or works.

Just as you can't earn salvation,
you can't earn sainthood.

True saints are the last people
who would put themselves on a pedestal.

Principle Number Two.

Once a saint is up there,
they generally don't have a clue
about what they are supposed to do.

Only in retrospect do we give them halos and holy faces.

Living saints aren't so easily pigeon-holed.

Archbishop John Habgood

used to talk about a healthy uncertainty.

Archbishop Donald Coggan

used to talk about being a schoolboy

when it came to prayer.

There's an element of sainthood
which is connected with being
spiritually impoverished,
a realisation that you are not
rich in spirit
but poor in spirit.

'Don't worry,'

the saintly bishop of Lincoln,

Edward King whispered to a young man

who was clearly intimidated by a very pious bunch of clergy,

'Don't worry, we ain't as good as we look!'

Principle Number Three:

Who is the dumb ass who put them up there
in the first place?

Even though the college of cardinals has a process

including beatification
and canonisation,
I guess the ultimate dumb ass who puts them there
has to be God,
who is dumb enough
to trust himself to his creation.
Dumb by the world's standards.
I would use other words,
like
God has faith enough to trust himself to his creation.
God has nerve enough to trust himself to his creation.
God is big enough to trust himself to his creation.
He absolutely trusts puny mortals
either to let him shine through
or quench him.
And to the world that may seem

utterly dumb.
But that is how God,
the God revealed as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
that is how God wishes to play it.
And All Saints are his team.
So often in stained glass windows
you can't see the saint depicted there
because of the dazzling light he or she lets through.
Saints are people who dazzle you
by letting Christ shine through them.
That is the only qualification for God's All Saints' team.
And there are four essential ingredients
to the Christ they diffuse.
The first is that Christ was a mystic

in the Jewish tradition,
as spirit-filled person
who wasn't an expert at talking about God,
but talked with God.

God direct.

Saints bank with God Direct.

The second quality is that Jesus was a prophet.

Not so much a prophet

who was a fortune teller

and a weather and God's mood forecaster,

but a prophet in the Jewish tradition,

who disturbed the privileged masses

by speaking up for the oppressed minority.

Such prophets comforted the afflicted

by afflicting and disturbing the comfortable.

Jesus the prophet

did that in spades

because he believed that every child

deserved the dignity of a child of God.

I understand the present Pope Benedict

has halted the process for making a saint

of his wartime predecessor Pius XII

because he failed to stand up for the six million Jews

cremated by the Nazis.

Saints don't turn a blind eye to oppression.

They denounce it.

They say the right word at the right time

and the wrong time.

Thirdly Jesus was wise,

the word, logos, wisdom made flesh.

Yet his wisdom was not conventional but subversive.

The perverse wisdom of

Blessed are those who mourn,

Blessed are the poor,

Blessed are the persecuted,

when the wisdom of the world shouts,

Blessed are those who have no grief,

Blessed are those who are rich,

Blessed are those who persecute,

who are agents of shock and awe.

And finally,

Christ was a movement founder.

This mystic cum prophet cum subversive wisdom teacher

founded a movement

which celebrated God being as close as touch

to every single child.

Whether he would recognise

today's church as the movement he founded

remains to be seen,

but that's the thing about movements,

they go places where you never imagined.

Saints like Christ

are about movement

never about static.

My job, claimed Cardinal Basil Hume,

is to take people from where they are

to places where they never dreamt they would be.

St Francis of Assisi

through to Ignatius Loyola

through to Mother Teresa of Calcutta,

they are all movement founders,

tremendous movements.

The alternative is the response
of the Wold's churchwarden
to the latest diocesan initiative.

'Don't give me all this change.

In these parts it's our inertia which keeps us going!

Saints do not stand still.

Unless of course,

and this is the real risk of true sainthood,

they end up

not so much as Palin post-turtles,

but nailed to a post

like their crucified saviour.

No one in their right mind courts crucifixion.

No one knows what to do when they are up there.

And as for the dumb ass

who put them up there in the first place,
well, there's quite a long short list of suspects,
God amongst them.

Except that God isn't about post-mortems,

'How on earth did this saint get up on this cross?'

God is about post-vitam,

after life rather than after death,

after a mystical,

prophetic,

subversely wise,

movement-founder of a life

he welcomes his saints

to the banquet of all banquets in heaven,

of which this Eucharist is a mere rehearsal.