

John Wyndham rides again!

David Wilbourne's sermon for the 3rd Sunday before Lent

As a teenager,

I was very taken with

science fiction writer John Wyndham,

especially where he championed the theory of parallel

universes.

Way back in the 1970s,

the idea of parallel universes seemed fanciful,

a minority obsession.

Parallel universes were bracketed with

my enthusiasm for Abba,

Roy Orbison

and, wait for it,

Roger Whitaker:

'Our David's a real crank;

he doesn't half pick 'em.'

When actually,

with the exception of Roger Whitaker,

I was stunningly before my time:

parallel universes

are now the main stay of

theoretical physics

and quantum theory.

Hah, how those who sneered at me in the 1970s

are laughing on the other side of their faces now.

The intriguing idea of the theory of parallel universes

is that no choice is final,

but that a universe created by each possibility.

For instance,

your father might have

wondered about marrying a red head or a blond.

In John Wyndham's system,

in one universe he marries a red head

and you have red hair,

in another he goes for gold and you're a blondie,

and so on.

Akin to the Christian creed:

in a universe of infinite possibilities,

every possibility is redeemable.

Obviously some parallel universes

will be nearer to us than others,

say one where we cut our toenails before breakfast

instead of before lunch,

and Wyndham raised the intriguing possibility

of skipping or being launched

from one universe to another.

Occasionally, when things don't quite seem in the right

place,

I wonder whether that has happened to me.

"I'm sure we always kept the pressure cooker

in the bottom right hand side of the cupboard;

why has it migrated to the top left?"

Or more alarmingly,

I thought I'd stumbled into a parallel universe

last week when I received yet another catalogue

for ecclesiastical requisites,

candles,

communion wine,

clerical shirts for the outsized priest,

by one pack of altar breads get one free

sort of thing.

On page 17 the following caught my eye:

'Tuesday 3 February Feast of St Blasé,

the martyred Bishop of Sebaste in Armenia,
reputed to have saved the life of a boy
choking on a fishbone.

It is customary to bless the throats of the faithful
on this day to preserve them from illnesses of the throat.'

The advert was for 'beeswax candles
customarily (that word again) intertwined as one at the base
and shaped like a wishbone.'

The advert featured a rather fetching young woman,
(not *customarily* found within the confines of a church)
having the lit candles held around her throat.

God knows what Health and Safety would make of that.

I think I prefer Fishermen's Friend.

Not least for the price.

70p for a pack of lozenges

far cheaper than the £54 they were customarily trying to
sting

the faithful for the St Blasé candle!

I'd never heard of St Blasé,
and often

I realise I stumble across a parallel universe
where all the minor saints had changed
into people I had never heard of.

For instance,

last Tuesday my Church Desk Diary

gave me the collect for St Anskar:

God of grace and might,

who sent your servant Anskar

to spread the Gospel to the Nordic peoples.

Nordic peoples??

Anskar??

What was this doing,

occupying half my Tuesday page?

And what about next Saturday,

14 February?

St Valentines Day?

No chance:

Lord of all,

who gave to your servants Cyril and Methodius

the gift of tongues to proclaim the Gospel to the Slavs...

And the 5 June, the eve of D Day?

‘Almighty God, who sent your servant Boniface

to preach the Gospel among the German peoples...’

I suppose it makes a change

from strafing the German peoples

with machine gun fire at Normandy!

In trepidation I turned to dear Rachel's birthday,

18 November,

and was dazzled by:

‘Lord God, who taught Elizabeth of Hungary

to recognise and reverence Christ

in the poor of this world...’

As if no brain in two millennia

had ever thought

of tending the poor

as being part of Christian discipleship.

OK,

anyone can trawl through the

Oxford Dictionary of Saints

or the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church

and find such fascinating examples,

but what was this lot doing in my desk diary?

And the collects were couched

in such a Monty Pythonish way:

Anskar and the Nordic peoples,
Cyril getting his tongues around the Slavs,
(presumably patron saint of the Clergy Discipline Measure!)
Surely I had landed in a parallel universe
where the Church
was the greatest instrument of humour
rather than the bastion of seriousness
which I have consistently tried to uphold
throughout my 12 years ministry here!

Mind you,
I was rather taken with Hildegard of Bingen,
that 12th Century mystic
known to us all.
'Almighty God, whose servant Hildegard
had an opinion on everything,
from the nature of the Incarnation

to the properties of nettles...'
I had never come across her before,
yet in a real sense I had known her all my life,
someone who was able to treasure
both the great and the small,
who was able to delight
both in complexity and simplicity
and move easily between the two.

That's the saint for me,
an honoured place
in my Desk Diary,
whatever universe I travelled in.

And that's the God for me,
God,
Almighty God,
the force behind every parallel universe

and yet
immersing himself in the particular,
the minute,
the trivial.
Breaking off his ministry to creation
to soothe
Peter's mum-in-law's headache.
That's a mighty miracle,
that the maker of the skies and seas
should take time to do that.
Just stay with that
and rejoice in the implications
that Almighty God
is bothered with your trivialities too.

Don't be distracted
by speculation

that the greater miracle
was that Peter continued to be devoted to Jesus,
even after he'd had the audacity
to heal his mum-in-law.
Nor that Peter's mum-in-law's illness
had probably been induced by Jesus
in the first place,
taking away the breadwinner
and leaving grandma to cope with
a stressed abandoned wife
and her screaming hungry children.
Forget all that,
just think of Jesus making time for her
and so making time for you.

Just think too of Paul,
becoming all things to all people,

Weak to the weak,

A Jew to the Jews,

A Gentile to the Gentiles,

to win them.

Delighting in all the particularities, all the oddities,

immersing himself in it all,

for the sake of putting across the Gospel,

the good news of the son of God

who preoccupied himself with healing mother-in-laws,

an Incarnation besotted with

the properties of nettles.

The Welsh poet David Gwenallt Jones

wrote a lovely timeless piece about

a Saint David

who took time for the little things:

I saw Dewi

strolling from country to country

like God's gypsy

with the Gospel and the Altar in his caravan:

and coming to us in the colleges and schools

to show us what is the purpose of learning.

He went down to the bottom of the pit with the miners

and cast the light of his wise lamp on the coal-face.

On the platform of the steel works

he put on the goggles and the little blue shirt

and showed the Christian being purified

like metal in the furnace;

and led the proletariat to his unrespectable Church.

He carried his church everywhere, as a body,

life, brain and will that did little and great things.

He brought the Church to our homes

and took bread from the pantry

*and bad wine from the cellar,
and stood behind the table like a tramp,
so as not to hide the wonder
of the Sacrifice from us.
And after the Communion we chatted by the fireside,
and talked to us about God's natural order,
the person, the family,
the nation and the society of nations,
and the Cross
keeping us from turning any one of them into a god.*

Our Gospel reading champions all that,
troubles with mum-in-law,
people with problems,
trivial and serious,
all surrounding Jesus,
who took time for them,

and then took time out for prayer,
an effortless movement between the things of earth
and the things of heaven.

We know how trivial things can fill our day,
and how much the trivial can loom as crucial.

Don't worry.

The Gospel shouts that our Lord
does not write you off,
but is with you in the little things,
and the Anskars and all the Nordic peoples
and all the possibilities of his parallel universes,

is with you in all that
so he can raise you for eternity.

So if I were you,

steer clear of the St Blasé Candle

and stick with **the** Fishermen's Friend!