

Nunc Dimittis

David Wilbourne's sermon for Candlemas Eve

I was six when we moved to East Hull,
my father's first post as a clergyman.
Our new home was in the tiny village of Marfleet,
which during the 20th century had been besieged
by sprawling corporation housing estates,
the Queen Elizabeth docks
and the Humbrol paint factory.
The morning after we moved in
my parents sent me off on an errand:
'David, go and get us a bottle of milk
from Mrs Rawling's farm;
she lives right next to the church.'

I obediently knocked and knocked and knocked

on the door of the whitewashed building adjacent
to the church,
but no one answered,
so I returned empty-handed.

'But she can't be out, she's always around,'
my father complained,

'Are you sure you got the right house?'

'Yes, the white house, next to the church,' I stammered.

White, white? Surely her house is redbrick.'

And then my dad started laughing.

'You've been knocking on the door of the synagogue!'

Captain Mainwaring would have added,

'You stupid boy!'

I wasn't that stupid, in that the synagogue

was the house next door to the church,
the farm next door but one.
Though it was a Saturday morning,
fortunately I hadn't coincided with the Sabbath service.

Years later I learned that Orthodox Jews
always set a man at the synagogue door
whenever they hold a service,
to look out for the Messiah.

I daren't imagine
what this synagogue Messiah-watcher
would have made
of a ginger-haired little boy
asking for milk with an accent
different from the rest of the East Hull urchins.

'It's him! He's come!

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...'

We're all called to be Messiah-watchers,
but what would have to happen
to make us trill our Nunc Dimittis?
The Bishop of Norwich recently asked me
if the Church of England deserved an Obama moment.

'You're talking to him, boyo,'
the voice in my head said,
whilst the voice from my mouth
muttered something inconsequential,
as you do when you're talking to bishops.

At their consecration they are fitted
with special machines in their chests
that emit invisible rays which scramble the brains
of people trying to talk to them.

But if our faith means anything at all,
we're all looking for a Messiah moment.

What would have to happen
to make us stop and say,
'That's it, Lord, mission accomplished!'

An end to third world debt?

Arms factories
going the way of coal mines and steel works
and closing down for ever?

Swords beaten into ploughshares,
or swords beaten into health-care
or swords beaten into food for starving millions?

Graham Norton being struck dumb?

Prayerful people,
Richard Dawkins among them,

flocking to church,
tickled pink by nothing more than
the BCP communion service?
Christ returning in all his glory,
vanquishing his foes,
and exalting yours truly
as his faithful servant?

'Nunc Dimittis,
Lord, now let your servant depart in peace...'

Of course, we all have different dreams
of what would prompt our Nunc Dimittis.

I don't see that as a problem really.

What worries me is folk who have no dreams,
to whom nothing could happen
which would make them say,

'Mission accomplished, Lord.'

By the healing pool of Bethesda,

Jerusalem's equivalent to Lourdes,

Jesus encountered a crippled man

who had been hanging around there

38 long years.

Jesus looks him in the eye and says,

'Do you really, really want to be cured?'

Or was his hanging around the pool,

moaning on about his ailments,

his actual raison d' être?

Do we really, really want a Messiah,

are we desperately looking for him,

working ceaselessly to pave the way

for his return?

Or are we just playing useless games,

all this churchy stuff

a quaint hanging around Bethesda's pool:

all we actually want and nothing more,

certainly we don't want any messiahs breaking in.

I'm sure St Paul,

star of Ben's sermon last week,

said somewhere,

'If for churchy stuff only we labour,

we of all men are most to be pitied.'

All Christians should be Simeons,

should be Annas,

their Nunc Dimittis on the tip of their tongue.

There needs to be a watching,

an aching,

a yearning,

a moment when indispensable you and me

breathes a sigh
and happily,
not grudgingly but happily
hands over and says,
'Lord, I can rest in peace happily now.'
It needn't be an earth shattering moment.

It may not come
with a ginger-haired little boy
collecting milk in Marfleet.
Although it clearly did come
with just a tiny baby
being brought into the temple
by his peasant parents.
'The soul is healed by being with children,'
Dostoyevsky claimed.

Like R S Thomas' old man realised
in his poem *Good*
it may come,
it may well come
as we fondly look at the next generation,
every mewling baby,
and rather than seeing them as threat
or not up to it,
see them as sheer gift.

*The old man comes out on the hill
and looks down to recall earlier days
in the valley. He sees the stream shine,
the church stand, hears the litter of
children's voices. A chill in the flesh
tells him that death is not far off*

*now: it is the shadow under the great boughs
of life. His garden has herbs growing.
The kestrel goes by with fresh prey
in its claws. The wind scatters the scent
of wild beans. The tractor operates
on the earth's body. His grandson is there
ploughing; his young wife fetches him
cakes and tea and a dark smile. It is well.*

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace,
Your word has been fulfilled.