

# *st john's farewell*

a sermon preached on

*epiphany 5*

9 February 2014

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr richard wilson, assistant curate*

Isaiah 58.1-12, Psalm 112, 1 Corinthians 2.1-16, Matthew 5.13-20.

What do you think of co-incidences? We all experience them, don't we? Seemingly improbably occurrences that fit together, unaccountably. How do you react to them? Are they for you, as the rationalist mathematicians would have us believe, simply the outworking of inevitable probability in our lives? Or are they something else?

Several co-incidences in my life are presently on my mind. For example, I began my working life on 6 February 78. A completely new phase of that working life commenced here at St John's on 6 February 2011. Just co-incidence? Here's a more interesting one.

Today on the 9 February 2014, I am preaching for you for the last time. On 9 February 1964, exactly 50 ago today, another R. Wilson preached from this pulpit, also for the last time – Fr. Roscoe Wilson, former Vicar of St John's. As some of you know Fr. Roscoe actually died while delivering his sermon. We are yet to know how far this co-incidence will extend.

My next appointment, commencing tomorrow, is with Converge International, better known to some of us as the Inter-Church Trade and Industry Mission, I have written a little about it in CONTACT. Mid last year when I was contemplating what next, I called the CEO of Converge. I have known him for some time. I said I was interested in meeting for a cup of coffee to talk about Corporate Chaplaincy. He responded: 'Well, well, isn't that a coincidence, I have a note in my diary to call Richard Wilson today about Corporate Chaplaincy.'

Co-incidence? The outworking of cold probability? The rational mathematics of a lifeless world? ...

Do you really think the frequency of the co-incidences we experience, *actually* fit with mathematical estimations of probability? I don't.

Neither did Patrick White, Australian novelist and Nobel Laureate, and sometime parishioner of St Paul's Castle Hill in Sydney. He believed co-incidence was evidence of divine organisation.

My interpretation of my experience of co-incidence is that within them is an intention, a directionality, a logic where events fit together in a way that has meaning. And, as you might expect, I do ascribe this to the working of the Spirit.

Sure, you can argue that in retrospect the logic is obvious and discernable, but if it is my logic it must have been in my mind and my intention at the outset and along the way. I can assure you that on 6 Feb 78 when I commenced work, I had no intention of preaching in this Church (from this pulpit) on 9 Feb 14!! Far from it!

So if not my logic, whose?

Where this idea of divine organisation attracts us, it is also unsettled by rational science which, in the hands of atheists such as Richard Dawkins, argues that physics and chemistry alone, unaided, can bring about, through genetic mutation and natural selection, the geological and evolutionary history which has delivered the world from the big bang to the current day.

This atheistic theory is known as material reductionism. It has been around for a long time but is currently under challenge by a number of post-rationalist scientists and philosophers. Their principle objection is the inability of the rational account of the processes of physics, chemistry to provide for, among other things, consciousness, meaning or purpose. They also doubt that there is enough space in geological time to arrive at the world in its present state of complexity – there must be something else going on.

American philosopher Thomas Nagel is one of the principal writers on this subject.<sup>1</sup> He excludes anything like God, but he will admit a *sensus divinitatus*, the possibility of something transcendental, something outside of our material and rational perception.

What's my point here? If Thomas Nagel and other post-rationalists are on to something and the material reductionist theory is to be doubted, if Patrick White's ideas on divine organisation are in someway correct, then perhaps we should re-think our experience of co-incidence? And if we conclude that there is 'something else going on', a *sensus divinitatus*, some divine organisation, how should we shape our lives as a result?

Jesus, sitting with his disciples, on the mountain says to them, 'you are salt, you are light'. Salt of the earth, light of the world. He does not say this to pay them a compliment. No, he tells the disciples that in being salt and light is responsibility and consequence. You are salt but if salt has lost its taste, it is not good for anything and should be thrown out. You are light but a light cannot be hidden under a bushel basket, it has to be put on a lampstand to give light to all.

We too are disciples. If we have heard the gospel and if we have become salt and light, then we also must be salty and shed light.

How?

This fragment of Matthew's gospel about salt and light sits inside his much wider treatise on ethics, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. I don't need to rehearse it all.

Just hear Isaiah again:

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear-guard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and the Lord will say, Here I am.

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<sup>1</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. Oxford: Oxford, 2012.

For me, this task of justice and mercy sits as the foundation of my discipleship and should drive all that I do ... sometimes it does when I respond faithfully to the divine order in my life.

So, as I leave you today, I see in this order, in the life we have shared together, in the changes that are being made for me, in me, ... and you, ... not as co-incidental mathematical phenomena, but as small steps in a progression, God's very engagement with us and in us.

Purposed towards the fulfilling of the law and the prophets and the bringing in of the kingdom. Not alone, because insofar as I have become part of you, so you have become part of me and we have and will continue to make this journey together.

[office@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:office@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)