

**St Andrew's Chesterton
Midnight Eucharist 2012**

I was born and bred in a house on the road between Kingston and Wimbledon. I went to school on Wimbledon Common in the era when a number one song in the hit parade could be performed on 'Top of the Pops' by a group of furry creatures with long noses.

*Underground, overground, wombling free,
the Wombles of Wimbledon Common are we.*

The Wombles were always there doing their work of keeping the common tidy, unnoticed and unregarded.

*People don't notice us, they never see,
under their noses a Womble may be.*

When I moved on from the world of the Wombles to the world of the Church of England I noticed that some things hadn't changed very much. Lots of dressing up in strange costumes and singing songs, for instance. Same meters too – did you know that you can sing the Wombling song to the tune of 'Abide with me' – try it at home or make a party game of it tomorrow.

A more serious similarity is that the omnipresence of the Wombles on their common is matched by the omnipresence of the Church of England in our green and pleasant land. Every square inch of England is in a parish and every parish has a church and every church has a priest, albeit that he or she may be shared with an increasing number of others.

But people don't seem to notice it, that under their noses the Church is working away very often cleaning up the mess that people have left and the mess they are in, and ensuring that this remains a green and pleasant land, physically, morally and spiritually. The Church of England may not have the numerical strength it once did, but we still represent over a million active church members living out their Christian vocation to be the salt of the earth – salt being the fairly invisible presence in the ancient world that ensured that meat and fish were preserved and did not rot. And we welcome millions more who still view the church as the place to turn to mark rites of passage and to sanctify their deepest celebrations and to walk prayerfully with them in their deepest losses.

We take for granted also the physical presence of churches in the landscape, their very presence bringing an assuring comfort and sense of stability. In plans for new towns you will usually see a church-like building at their heart reassuringly present. I have read descriptions of them in the blurbs describing them not explicitly as churches with spires but as public buildings with strong vertical significance. The planners, of course, don't want to pay for them; the most they do these days is reserve a plot that the church may purchase. But don't get me into that or I may be ranting all night.

I hope it doesn't sound too self-pitying of me to say that sometimes it seems to me that the Church, like the Wombles, is simply not noticed and what it does is taken for granted.

Except of course when it makes it to the top of the headlines and that is usually bad news for the church. In recent months the vote on women bishops and the consultation on same-sex marriage

has, in all honesty, not been great publicity for the Church of England and we have seemed both wrong-footed and out of touch with the public mood. But there is a bit of me which says; 'Well, it's not the church's calling to be popular, the church should not decide its teachings according the latest opinion poll, and sometimes it is our calling to resist popular sentiment.'

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

Jesus was always regarded with suspicion by the powers-that-be, the world, from King Herod onwards; he suffered at the hands of politicians and power-brokers. Popularity is not always our Christian calling.

But there is a sting in the tail for those of us in the Church, the New Testament people of God.

He came to what was his own and his own people received him not.

The shock was that God's people did not recognise him and did not receive him, and the truth is that we still don't. Jesus said that we receive him when we welcome the little child, when we feed the hungry, when we clothe the naked, when we visit the prisoner and when we welcome the stranger. We are quite good at the little child bit – we love Christmas. We are quite good at the Christian Aid bit – feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Some are good at the prison visiting bit but welcoming the stranger? This is about recognising that Christ comes to us through people who are different from us, whose way of life may be different from us, whose experience of God may be different from us. His own people received him not.

For the record I am 100% in favour of women bishops and I was horrified that it didn't get through. I am frankly not sure what I think about same-sex marriage. What I do know is that the bible teaches that God is love and where love is, there God is. I am nervous that in saying there is no room in the inn for some we may be turning Christ himself away.

But we must work that out in the Church – work it out honestly, openly, faithfully and prayerfully. That is a big task for us in the year that lies ahead. But we can put that all aside for this night and the days that lie ahead, for our task now is to turn again to the Magnum Mysterium with which our service began, the great mystery, the Word made flesh, the God who has come among us to draw us all to a new way of being and a new way of living. Then we shall perhaps gain a greater perspective on the issues that divide and dog us, an eternal perspective, a vision that transforms everything.

And then those of us glad to be known as Christians can get on doing what we're called to do, playing our part in keeping the world tidy, and getting on with doing it without need of reward or recognition.

So my Christmas message to you tonight is simply this – remember you're a Womble.