



St Nicholas and old stories

There is a sense in which St Nicholas is the most famous saint in the world, through the lens of his current development as Santa Claus. The Church celebrated his festival day on Wednesday and for the next three weeks, you will see Santa everywhere: on advertisements, in the streets, in the malls and, of course, behind his sleigh on Christmas Eve.

If you know where to look, you will also be able to locate St Nicholas in a stained window at St Andrew's Church in Surbiton. Here, the image portrayed comes from a Medieval myth about this genuinely historical 6th Century Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. The story goes that an evil shopkeeper in the town captured three young boys, chopped them up and turned them into a pickle. St Nicholas heard of this horror and prayed hard to God: because of the purity of St Nicholas' faith, the boys were brought back to life, and bobbed back up, whole again, in the barrel singing Alleluia.

The stained glass window in St Andrew's Church, from around about 1890, shows St Nicholas piously gazing at three naked boys in a wooden barrel. I guess the original congregation broadly knew about the Myra myth of the resurrected boys, and understood what it was about. Today, if anyone cares to look at the window in this nook of the church, I suspect they feel rather uncomfortable. Certainly, I had to dig around into church history to find out what was going on to try to make sense of it.

A century ago, there was a touching, and, I believe,

mostly asexual, romantic notion about young boys. Look at the original of "Goodbye Mister Chips", and the final minute shows a series of boys beaming out at the screen, with beatific smiles, and the camera lingers lovingly over them.

Now, knowing what we know about child abuse, and the horrific consequences for victims, we find such images hard to stomach. I even thought about trying to remove the stained glass at St Andrew's, before thinking better of it: it is an image of its time, and ultimately, the private parts of all the boys are discreetly covered over by the barrel. It's not an indecent image in itself.

Beyond this, how much of what we find normal today will look very different in a hundred years' time? I sometimes wonder about the normalisation of ghoulish costumes at Halloween, and think that future generations will find this strange.

Or what about Santa Claus himself? Currently, he is a miraculous presence, who delivers literally billions of presents with the help of eight reindeer and a well drilled team of elves, and this is universally understood; it is faithfully transmitted from adults to children in generation after generation.

Could there be a time when this will be regarded as weird? A hundred years ago, people rejoiced in contemplating St Nicholas in his own prayerful contemplation of young children and found spiritual sustenance in it. What will Santa be in 2117?

December 2017. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>