

## **Daydream Believer**

## **About the author**

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Mike lives in Gloucester where he still helps in the leadership of his local church. He is married to Jacky and has two grown up children.

# **Daydream Believer**

**a vicar's ministry goes parabolic**

**Mike Burke**



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## Prologue

# Struggling out of the chair

**D**uty called. Obligation whispered in my reluctant ear. Responsibility beckoned me to overcome the inertia and safety of a particularly comfortable and inviting armchair. Every fibre in my body resisted this movement and struggled to overcome the pull of gravity that wanted to envelop me in the reckless indolence of a warm, familiar room and a quiet night in. From somewhere deep within me the gently disturbing thought entered my mind that this was not what I had signed up for. This was not how my life was meant to be.

Where had my drive and energy gone? It had already been a long and demanding day and the thought of going out to spend another evening doing something I would rather not be doing, in the presence of an eclectic group of people with whom I had little in common irritated me profoundly, draining me of any remaining enthusiasm and positivity. Quiet unexpressed resentment rose within me as I left the security of the living room for the formality of my study to collect numerous dog-eared files, my personal organiser and a rather battered

looking *A to Z Street Map*. The words of *Pink Floyd* – 'hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way'<sup>1</sup> floated into my mind and refused to leave, providing the internal musical accompaniment for the activities that followed.

The distance between the two rooms was negligible yet in terms of the different worlds of work and leisure, duty and recreation, public persona and the real 'me', such a journey represented stepping across a huge void. The distance between the two seemed to grow with each passing day, presenting a formidable chasm which I had grown accustomed to breaching with regular weariness.

I collected my car keys from the hook by the door. Pointed and squirted them at my ageing Rover 45 diesel with a fish badge that rested wearily on the rain-soaked driveway outside. This fading iconic emblem of the now moribund British motor vehicle industry appeared emblematic of my life and aspirations - so many new starts and tantalising possibilities, yet so many promising breakthroughs that turned into disappointing outcomes before finally succumbing to global economic forces which only celebrated the strong and the successful.

I flattened what remained of my hair, slotted in a rather grubby work collar and paused in front of a familiar photograph which illuminated the dark and draughty entrance hall. The woman staring back in the photo always seemed to gaze out with penetrating recognition as if she understood my troubled mind and reluctant spirit, whilst imploring, me to move on and haul myself out of the well of my self pity. With that reassuring smile, I closed the door and stepped into the embrace of a dark and windswept winter evening. The night seemed to close in around me penetrating even my most optimistic thoughts and sapping my positive energies with a deep sense of foreboding and cheerlessness.

Twenty minutes later I was negotiating a series of pot holes in a crowded and inadequately lit car park. Trying not to scrape my

1 'Time' written by Mason, Waters, Wright and Gilmour in album 'Dark Side of the Moon', 1973

car against a Mini Metro parked so badly that it resembled a vehicle hurriedly abandoned in a snow storm rather than one whose elderly owner had arrived ten minutes earlier, when numerous car parking options had presented more choices than they were able to accommodate. I stepped out and immediately sank into a puddle soaking my new, slightly quirky leather shoes purchased earlier that month in the hope that they would make me appear more self confident and in touch with modern tastes, less like a Morris dancing Geography teacher. I squelched my way across the pot-holed car park.

The landscape of puddles gave way to a 1950s wooden framed pre-fabricated building where I was greeted with the smell of wet floorboards, weak coffee, dusty books and disinfectant. My thinning cranium was assaulted by the blast of a gas heater, creaking and pinging overhead. I paused briefly to wonder where else such ancient heating systems were still deployed in twenty first century Britain, but drew a blank. This was a unique environment, locked in time not because it couldn't change but rather because it didn't see why it should.

The room was furnished with those steel tubular stacking chairs with green, faded upholstery that were banished from polite society somewhere towards the end of the 1960s when public participation in communal activities was surrendered in favour of spending an evening watching the *Forsyth Saga* on television. They were arranged in jumbled rows in order to allow each occupant the opportunity to stare meaningfully into the back of the head of those late arrivals who were accordingly punished by the indignity of having to sit at the front.

An inviting semi-circle might have made a welcome alternative, but this was not a venue particularly acquainted with bold experimentation or informality. I reflected briefly on the fact that this was probably the last remaining public building in England that still retained such seating without ever being troubled by the thought of its immediate replacement.

Familiar faces looked up enquiringly over duck-egg blue crockery cup and saucers. Many were already engaged in intense one-to-one conversations, few seemed to notice my squelching arrival nor were they willing to offer a smile or a greeting. I

secretly longed for one of those brightly lit and funkily decorated hotel conference suites that you enter wearing a company badge, a business suit and carrying complementary stationary and the mandatory laptop. Instead a charming grey haired lady in fleece jacket and black leggings, retained from the first time around rather than the result of any current retrospective fashion choice, caught my eye and with her best efforts at cheeriness asked if I had signed in by the door and whether I was bringing any apologies. I briefly considered apologising for my whole life which up to that point had probably been a bit of a disappointment to myself, but thought better of any attempt at wit or irony, a precaution that was supported by the fact that similar attempts at humour had seldom been understood or appreciated on previous occasions.

I was pointed in the direction of a low hatch in the prefabricated wall where I struggled to stoop in order to request a coffee, white, two sugars. My request was soon answered by the offer of duck-egg blue crockery and a plastic spoon, which subsequently buckled and bent upon immersion. The brown indeterminate liquid both failed to revive or stimulate my energy levels and also fell short of the market standard that it purported to be challenging by its fair-traded status.

I grabbed a broken custard cream, more out of habit than enthusiasm and laid it down in the brown liquid now occupying the saucer, the result of an earlier collision with a late arrival who likewise had struggled to stoop under the serving hatch in the wall.

I straightened myself up, took a deep breath and gazed around the room. A group of apparent strangers with little in common, waiting to go home. The reason for their assembly appeared about as pointless as a snooze button on a smoke alarm. I breathed in the mustiness of the atmosphere, the murmur of polite conversations and heroic attempts at forced humour, accompaniment by the rattling noise of people scraping their shins on green tubular steel stacking chairs whilst being lightly grilled by pinging overhead convection heaters. I took a sip of the brown liquid. It tasted of mediocrity and missed opportunities.

*Welcome to the Church of England!*

## Chapter One

### Arguing in the car park

“**W**hat did you think Kevin?”

But I wasn't listening.

I had switched off some time earlier. My attention had taken a side turning into the land of day dream during an earlier presentation on parish share allocations and Deanery indices of multiple social deprivation. My concentration hadn't been enhanced by a throbbing headache brought on by extreme temperature contrasts afflicting my tired body, due to the top half of my body being vertically assaulted by intense, radiating heat emanating from the ancient overhead heating system, whilst my feet had passed into unconsciousness by the numbing cold and incessant drafts throughout the two hour meeting. I recalled something I felt sure I had been taught in school many years before about how thermocouples work. Apparently it is possible to generate electrical energy through the application of extreme temperatures to opposite ends of metal conductor rods. I irreverently wondered if the creation of such temperature differentials was all part of a sinister Church of England plan to turn all Deanery Synod members into living batteries, capable of generating their own energy supplies in order to heat their drafty church halls and church buildings...

This thought caused me to drift off further into recalling one of my favourite films, *The Matrix* in which the mysterious and enigmatic Morpheus seeks to explain the alternative reality cloaked from the view of the inquisitive Neo, played by Keanu Reeves. In this strange film noir reality, Neo discovers that all humans are held in captivity by a huge conspiratorial computer programme - the Matrix. This system relies upon human batteries providing the electrical energy required to serve its needs. All humans were effectively slaves, held in unwitting, unconscious compliance that could only be broken when they dare to summon up sufficient faith to question the reality they lived under and to release themselves from the power of the Matrix<sup>2</sup>.

*(Across the room, a DARK FIGURE stares out the tall windows veiled with decaying lace. He turns and his smile lights up the room)*

MORPHEUS: At last.

*(He wears a long black coat and his eyes are invisible behind circular mirrored glasses. He strides to Neo and they shake hands)*

MORPHEUS: Welcome, Neo. As you no doubt have guessed, I am Morpheus.

NEO: It's an honor.

MORPHEUS: No, the honor is mine. Please. Come. Sit.

*(He nods to Trinity)*

MORPHEUS: Thank you, Trinity.

*(She bows her head sharply and exits through a door to an adjacent room. They sit across from one another in cracked, burgundy-leather chairs)*

2      Written by Larry and Andy Wachowski (Shooting Script 3/9/98) Warner Brothers 1999

MORPHEUS: I imagine, right now, you must be feeling a bit like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole?

NEO: You could say that.

MORPHEUS: I can see it in your eyes. You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up.

*(A smile, razor-thin, curls the corner of his lips)*

MORPHEUS: Ironically, this is not far from the truth. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Can you tell me, Neo, why are you here?

NEO: You're Morpheus, you're a legend. Most hackers would die to meet you.

MORPHEUS: Yes. Thank you. But I think we both know there's more to it than that. Do you believe in fate, Neo?

NEO: No.

MORPHEUS: Why not?

NEO: Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life.

MORPHEUS: I know exactly what you mean.

*(Again, that smile that could cut glass)*

MORPHEUS: Let me tell you why you are here. You have come because you know something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You've felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world. You don't know what, but it's there like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

NEO: The Matrix?

MORPHEUS: Do you want to know what it is?

*(Neo swallows hard and nods)*

MORPHEUS: The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

NEO:           What truth?

MORPHEUS: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind.

*(The LEATHER CREAKS as he leans back)*

MORPHEUS: Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself.

*(Morpheus opens his hands. In the right is a red pill. In the left, a blue pill.)*

MORPHEUS: This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe.

*(The pills in his open hands are reflected in the glasses)*

MORPHEUS: You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

*(Neo feels the smooth skin of the capsules, the moisture growing in his palms)*

MORPHEUS: Remember that all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more.

*(Neo opens his mouth and swallows the red pill. The Cheshire smile returns)(1)*

I enjoyed the opportunity to indulge my imagination and allow my mind to roam freely over such evocative concepts. What was the connection between discovering the alternative reality beyond *the Matrix* and discovering an alternative reality beyond the familiar model of Church as served up and rolled out each Sunday morning? What faith choice did those red and blue pills represent that Morpheus offered to Neo when he wanted to find out what the Matrix was?

I also speculated on why Neo appeared to be wearing a black cassock in the later, somewhat disappointing sequels? Why aren't there any Kung Fu-kicking, black leather-clad 'babes' in evidence beating up the forces of control and complacency within General Synod? Where can you buy those trendy sunglasses and why was such a great role as Neo wasted on Keanu Reeves...?

"KEVIN. What do YOU think?"

All of a sudden the cold hand of reality descended upon my fantasy world. "Ask me another, less direct question." I replied, trying to bring myself out of what was increasingly becoming my grumpy old man default mode and into a more caring, responsive and spiritual mode instead. As I thought better of adopting such an abrupt and negative demeanour, I decided to change tack.

"I'm sorry Marjorie. It's been a long day and a long meeting."

"Well, you're not the only one who's tired. Some of us have worked a full school day before coming here, but I thought that it went quite well really, although there were some contrary views."

"Really," I replied, trying to coax myself back into a positive mindset whilst re-entering my well worn and more polite social persona. Gradually I was restored to the solid reality of my real identity as Reverend Kevin Trevor Birley, vicar of St Ebbs Moretown, Sheffield.

"Yes. I thought that at least everyone was able to have their say." Marjorie continued. "Ordinary people as well as clergy. If you know what I mean? So often these meetings get dominated by the clergy and the loudest voices among them...."

Marjorie was a wonderful person. She really was. She deserved a better response from me, even if it was after the end of a marathon Deanery Synod. She was in her late fifties, a former churchwarden, a teacher approaching retirement and stalwart of her parish church. She was always the first person to arrive at any meeting and the last to leave. She had amazing spiritual and emotional strength which she invested in all the people she came into contact with and most of all, she was reliable. The kind of person who would take a bullet for you. Without her and people like her, there would be no such thing as local church serving its local community. I had learnt that the effectiveness and indeed long term viability of St Ebbs if not the wider Church rested on the shoulders of people just like Marjorie. She truly deserved greater respect and reverence than I was showing her at ten fifteen on a wet January evening as the church meeting finally broke up and tired bodies hauled tubular steel chairs around a damp, wooden church hall floor in search of stacking possibilities. As those same bodies started to decant into the church car park, various conversations continued as lights were extinguished in the tired church hall and the car park was lit by car headlights, drivers anxious to get home for some relaxation in what remained of the day.

“Sorry Marjorie.” I apologised once again, not wishing to appear distracted or unappreciative and guided Marjorie towards her car and away from the worst pot holes and puddles which littered the church car park. “Yes it was good that so many people were able to have their say and to start to engage with the issues of mission today.”

I considered whether I wanted to continue my discussion with Marjorie or whether I should make an excuse and head off home. I nursed a secret ambition for a doner kebab on my way home for some reason. I had been salivating over the prospect during the meeting, the longer it dragged on, the greater the appeal of reconstituted, badly cooked dead sheep, salad and extra chilli sauce. Whilst musing over these options I made my way outside into the dark inky embrace of a poorly lit northern post industrial conurbation. It had started to rain, the street lights illuminating the pock marked car park whose numerous puddles had greeted my earlier arrival. It resembled an urban

battlefield scarred by various water filled craters around which dispersing members of the Deanery Synod were now cautiously tiptoeing as they made their weary way home to more civilised surroundings. Across the car park I observed a rather heated exchange of views occurring in front on a battered Volvo estate. A smart, younger man in business suit and sharp designer spectacles was berating a somewhat large elderly clergyman weighed down with a bundle of lever arch files. I recognised the man in the suit from similar previous meetings but couldn't recall his name – an experience not uncommon in parish ministry.

“It's all right for you,” the man in the suit protested, “your parish has its own vicar, but how are we going to manage sharing a priest with St Agnes? The two parishes just happen to live alongside each other, but we don't have anything in common. They're up the candle and we're Low Church. People just won't have it. I tell you they won't tolerate it. We're tired of being pushed around by the bullies in the Diocese. At least they should have the common decency to come here tonight to explain their thinking, rather than leave you, the Rural Dean, sorry Area Dean to explain it all.”

“First of all let me explain that there are *no* ‘them’ and ‘us’. It's all ‘us’.” The overweight, elderly clergyman explained. “We are a family. A Christian family. I have to declare an interest that those ‘bullies in the Diocese’ you refer to are my friends. They're not...”

“That's bollocks and you know it,” injected the man in the suit, suddenly raising the heat of the discussion. “The Diocese forgets that it's the parishes that keep them going. We're at the sharp end of mission, while they sit in their offices and stare at their budgets and quota figures. It's just numbers on a page to them.”

“Hang on a sec.” I interrupted, finding myself being drawn into what was turning into a good old fashioned, stand-up row.

“Just who do you think the Diocese is?” I challenged the nameless besuited man in the hope of drawing his venom away from the beleaguered Area Dean who was in danger of

becoming the epitome of everything that was wrong with the Church of England in the other man's eyes.

“You know who I mean. All those who work at Church House... those advisors and officers, the Bishop and all his cronies – sorry – staff.”

“Well I'm no expert,” I continued, stating the obvious and starting to regret my intervention, unsure as to which side of the argument I would come down on. “But, the Diocese is effectively three secretaries typing in an office, trying to do the best they can. It's just too easy to blame those whom we don't really know and whom we regard as faceless bureaucrats. It's always the fault of 'them upstairs', those we consider powerful, but we are the ones who have all the real power. We can change things. We can oversee decline or we can plan for growth. If there is any crisis in the Church it is a crisis that we have allowed to happen by letting others do our thinking and make all the decisions. It's not resources we lack, it's imagination!”

I was getting quite wound up now, but I still didn't know where my arguments were leading. My rising self-assurance was in danger of being undermined when the focus of debate suddenly started to centre upon my own contribution.

“Well what do you suggest then? If you were Pope what would YOU do?” Suddenly the nameless man in a suit was sensing a new clergy victim he could pick on as the earthly manifestation of all that he perceived was wrong with the Church. Now I had to think on my feet.

“Me?” Suddenly having drawn the sting of the argument away from the Area Dean I started to feel increasingly vulnerable. I hadn't thought through my argument in advance and if I was honest, I too shared many of the man in the suit's frustrations. It was time to use irreverence to lighten the atmosphere and give me space to collect my thoughts.

“Well, the first thing I would do is forget all that medieval nonsense about celibacy and let's modernise and get on down and get groovy with all the hot prots...”

An eerie silence descended as I realised levity was not called for at such a moment, my audience didn't share my sense of irony.

“You know what I'm getting at. I didn't literally mean ‘Pope’.” Suddenly the man in the suit realised he hadn't cornered the market in speaking rubbish and was starting to get a bit frustrated with what he saw as a professional who should know better, not taking his opinions seriously.

“If I was in charge? Pope. Bishop. God. General Secretary, whatever title you want.” I countered, filling in once again whilst trying to organise my mind into rational thinking at the end of what had been a very long day and a very boring meeting. “I would start giving out cookery lessons!”

“Cookery lessons? What DO you mean dear boy?” interjected the Area Dean in a manner that said, ‘I am still here’ and ‘remember I've been in parish ministry for a lot longer than you, so this better be good’.

“Well.....” I said, hoping that my illustration would bear the weight of intense scrutiny. “We have been defining the issues we face as a resources problem, rather than a conceptual one. What we have essentially been arguing about this evening is the scarcity of resources. Clergy numbers are declining, congregations are shrinking and we all still trying to do what we have always done plus lots of extra things with fewer resources. Agreed?”

“Keep going. I still don't see what this has to do with cookery?” The man in the suit replied. His curiosity nonetheless aroused.

“To use a metaphor. We have been talking about the size of cakes. We all bring ingredients to the table, notably money as well as our voluntary help, experience, gifts and good will, but essentially financial resources. This money is then sent off in the form of our quota payments to Church House. In other words, the Bishop and those who advise him.”

“Where they waste the money on committees, Synods and advisors,” interrupted the man in the suit, sensing an opportunity to reinforce his previous point.

“Whatever. Well these ingredients are then mixed up and baked into a cake which then has to be sliced up and shared around. What we are all arguing about is the size of the slice. Some people are saying we deserve our slice because we are a

larger and more successful church. Others say that we deserve a bigger slice because we are a poor and struggling with all sorts of social problems. Others say they are a special case because they have multiple numbers of congregations and buildings to manage. Others claim special treatment because they represent a particular style or tradition. So on and so forth. But no-one ever questions why we are all baking cakes in this way? Why don't we bake our own cakes instead?"

"Ah yes, but WE are the Church of England." the Area Dean countered, assuming an air of authority. "We are not congregationalists. We are the national church, with responsibility towards the whole nation and not just to our congregations. If we all did our own thing and only looked to our own congregations, then large parts of the country would be essentially de-churched. Churches would not be able to pay for their own priests and so would close and the church would have to withdraw." The Area Dean came to a triumphant conclusion, restored in the knowledge that he had made what he regarded as a stout defence for the comprehensiveness of the Church he had served for so many years.

"That's precisely my point." I announced triumphantly sensing my inner spirit coming alive as my passion started to awaken after many years of defeated slumber. "We would claim we no longer think this way, but essentially we still operate the same model of church that has been around since the middle ages." I decided to take the argument to the Area Dean, more confident playing the role of poacher rather than game keeper.

"We see Church as the building, plus the priest plus the appropriate financial support. When these are withdrawn, the church is absent, the gospel is silenced and God leaves the building." I suddenly found myself re-energised at half past ten in the evening in a soggy car park following a miserable meeting. "So why not use those ingredients to make something other than cakes? Why do we need clergy anyhow? Why does every function of leadership have to rest within the ministry of one person? Why do we expend all this energy in propping up a structure whose time has come? Why not think outside of the ecclesiastical box? Why not trust God to build His Church and then we'll worry about the structures later?"

I awaited the applause. The calls of ‘hear, hear’ or ‘Amen, brother, preach it’. But none came.

“Yes, but... to use your analogy, not everyone can bake their own cakes.” The nameless business man replied thoughtfully, now sounding more like the face of conservatism and restraint, rather than the hot-headed activist he had initially resembled.

“Yes they can.” I maintained.

“No they can't! It's okay for you. But many of us haven't got churches with huge amounts of gifted people who want to do things. We have a few capable individuals who do just about everything. Without such people our church wouldn't function. But they are few in number and they all have jobs and families, they have lives to lead and less and less time to offer. Whilst those who have time on their hands are either too old, too frail, too young, too confused, or just plain worn out from having done everything for years. It's as though the willing aren't able and the able aren't willing.”

“Snap. Same with us.” the Area Dean interrupted. Then followed a brief pause in which he composed himself, whilst the rest of us waited in expectation, assuming that he was about to offer some hugely significant and penetrating theological insight, but it never came. It had been a long day for him as well.

“We're still missing the point.” I felt the heavy hand of responsibility upon my shoulder. After all, I had initiated this three way debate; it now seemed to be falling to me to bring it to some sort of conclusion. The car park was suddenly plunged into total darkness by the activities of a diligent caretaker closing up the church hall building in a rather loud and deliberate manner which said, ‘You might like standing in the rain talking theology, but I'm bloody cold and want to go home to my nice warm bed and nice warm wife.’

“We don't have to do it the way we have always done it. There's more than one way to stuff a mushroom. And there's more than one way to do Church. We are all talking about how to do what we have always done, but now with less money, fewer resources and less available time. What we should be talking about are the fundamental questions.”

“And just what ARE the fundamental questions?” The Area Dean at last recovering his poise and experience sufficiently to ask a relevant and penetrating leading question.

“Well I don't really know...” I admitted in a moment of brutal, yet depressing honesty, fearing that I had painted myself into a theological corner without really thinking about an escape route. Then a much needed adrenalin rush kicked in to rescue me from looking a total fool and gave birth to the kernel of an idea which energised my creative thinking sufficiently to allow me to continue.

“... But I guess the fundamental questions have to be found in the area of, what is the good news revealed in Jesus Christ for us in the twenty first century? How should that good news be lived out and presented? What forms of community do we need to develop in order to present that good news and to sustain people in their understanding and experience and what kind of leadership is required in order to deliver all of the above.”

“Are those your cars over there?” The grumpy church caretaker interrupted our lofty theological discussion with the cold hand of practical realism. “Because if they are, you'll be walking home in the rain, because I am about to lock this car park and any cars left in here will have to be recovered in the morning.”

Marjorie, the man in the suit, the Area Dean and myself all quickly got the message and dispersed to our various means of transport like guilty school children caught out by the teacher.

“Do you need a lift?” I enquired of my un-named, suited companion.

“Wouldn't mind. But I also need to get something to eat on the way home. I came here straight from work.”

“Fancy a doner kebab?” I asked hopefully.

“Now you're speaking my language,” came the reply.