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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (December 2014)



*Andrew and Jan Scotchmer - Salisbury Cathedral - Advent Sunday 2014
Well before evening's darkness overcame the light (See article 66 below)*

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **December 2014** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website: <http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

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“This and That” - 28 December, 2014

At the Nine Lessons and Carol service in St John’s last Sunday evening, the congregation roared melodiously into my left ear even more strongly than the harmonious fortissimo of the choir into my right ear. It filled me with a sense of well being. A congregation in full throat signifies that all is well.

Macaronic doggerel

The church was nearly full, beautifully decorated, and spectacularly floodlit outside. There were moments of intense joy during the service. I am addicted to descants. I suspect that this is a sign of musical vulgarity, but I don’t care. To hear the sopranos in a choir soar off into the stratosphere thrills me beyond telling. Especially if the descant is well known, as with “O Come all ye Faithful.” The last verse of “*Unto us a Boy is Born*” also thrills:

*O and A and A and O
Cantemus in choro
Voice and organ, sing we so,
Benedicamus Domino*

It is macaronic doggerel and I love it. Especially if the organ thunders, as Adrian has the courage to let it.

Macaronic Vicar

Our conversation at the Vicarage is often macaronic. Possibly just because I am a hopeless linguist I arrogantly and inaccurately pepper my conversation with phrases from all the languages I have so ineffectively studied, as well as any others that I happen to have come into contact with. In the morning I am likely to greet Diana, the squirrels, the cold weather, the world and the day with a macaronic jumble of nonsense: “*Mangwanani meine frau. Hoe gaan dit met u? Voetsak jou bliksem* (to the squirrels). This porridge is *mushi sterek ek se. Ndinotenda*.”

Quintessential Anglicans

We all need a Christian hero or two. Real flesh and blood ones. Not ascetic monsters like Simeon Stylites. His heroic asceticism stank so vilely it nauseated from half a mile down wind.

My heroes need to be human, fallible, flawed, and yet to have their feet on solid rock. Samuel Johnson, for example. From one perspective he was almost a lunatic, from another the sanest man who ever lived. Another is C. S. Lewis, rescued from his adulaters and hagiographers by A. N. Wilson's critical biography and emerging, to my way of thinking, all the more a hero just because of his flaws. Both Johnson and Lewis were quintessential Anglicans. As such they help hearten me as one.

Betjeman

John Betjeman too was an Anglican. I love and admire him. He was a high churchman, an aesthete, a lover of beauty and tradition, an extremely knowledgeable and effective champion of Victorian architecture and a warm and faithful friend. His wife

became a Roman Catholic, which disturbed him greatly. Friends, such as Evelyn Waugh, exerted all sorts of pressure to turn him Roman as well. It was to no avail. Partly because, good Anglican that he was, he was a doubter, often clinging to faith “by an eyelid”. The certainty of Rome, or of evangelical Protestantism was not for him.

Every pew sheet should at some time print Betjeman’s very moving “House of Rest”. It tells of a clergy widow, at the end of her days, listening for the bells for Eucharist to sound in the Market Square, when...

*The veil between her and her dead
Dissolves and shows them clear,
The Consecration Prayer is said
And all of them are near.*

House of Rest

Now all the world she knew is dead
In this small room she lives her days
The wash-hand stand and single bed
Screened from the public gaze.

The horse-brass shines, the kettle sings,
The cup of China tea
Is tasted among cared-for things
Ranged round for me to see -

Lincoln, by Valentine and Co.,
Now yellowish brown and stained,
But there some fifty years ago
Her Harry was ordained;

Outside the Church at Woodhall Spa
The smiling groom and bride,
And here's his old tobacco jar
Dried lavender inside.

I do not like to ask if he
Was “High” or “Low” or “Broad”
Lest such a question seem to be
A mockery of Our Lord.

Her full grey eyes look far beyond
The little room and me
To village church and village pond
And ample rectory.

She sees her children each in place
Eyes downcast as they wait,
She hears her Harry murmur Grace,
Then heaps the porridge plate.

Aroused at seven, to bed by ten,
They fully lived each day,

Dead sons, so motor-bike-mad then,
And daughters far away.

Now when the bells for Eucharist
Sound in the Market Square,
With sunshine struggling through the mist
And Sunday in the air,

The veil between her and her dead
Dissolves and shows them clear,
The Consecration Prayer is said
And all of them are near.

(68) **“This and That” - 21 December, 2014**

One of my less than commendable little delights, when visiting strange parish churches, is to ask any parishioners I encounter: “What’s your vicar like?” If there is a significant pause before a careful and qualified answer, I conclude that the poor fellow has less than full approval. Very rarely indeed does my question ever elicit downright disloyalty, I am pleased to say. Disapproval has to be inferred, either from that pregnant pause or from faint praise.

I ask my question out of professional interest. It is all a part of taking the temperature of a parish church, to compare with that of my own. I peruse the notice board (is it up to date and tidy) and the choir stalls (for evidence of a choral tradition). Does the church appear well loved and cared for? I count candlesticks and sniff for any lingering and lovely scent of incense for indications of high churchmanship. I skim pewsheets for signs of life and activity. Evidence of trendiness and electronic high jinks leaves me uneasy.

I love visiting parish churches, especially those that appear well loved and alive.

Pious hypocrites

We bagged sacks of acorns last year to give away as pig food. This year there have been none. The squirrels have been all the more bold, predatory and ingenious as a result. Using as a launching pad an old and substantial tree stump in front of the Vicarage, they have gnawed one bird feeder to its ruin and systematically rifled two others. Like praying mantises, and the biblical Pharisees, they are sanctimonious hypocrites. Their little hands held piously together, as if in prayer, they sit contemplative and still, nursing greedy and thieving thoughts. Then with a mighty leap they hang upside down on the feeders, chewing their way into and through anything on offer.



Last Saturday Diana and I took the chainsaw to their launching pad stump. To our surprise we managed to take it down to ground level without ruining the chainsaw or mutilating ourselves. Will this deter the squirrels permanently, or is it but the first skirmish of a long war?

The Anvil

A few weeks ago, on our way home from Haslemere, we avoided the fast, motorway route in favour of a far shorter, much slower and more interesting minor road route, and so stopped for lunch in Bishops Waltham. There, fortuitously, we enjoyed the best steak and kidney pie we have eaten in many years. The local butcher directed us to tearooms called “The Anvil”, an establishment combined, unusually, with a wine and spirit merchants called “Just in Case”. All the main meals at “The Anvil” are homemade. They are also delicious and piping hot, if the steak and kidney pie is anything to go by. The mulled wine was second to none.

The presiding genius, host, or maitre d’ is Fred Woodfine. He is bearded, wears shorts throughout the winter as well as the summer, is extremely genial and informative, but not at all intrusive. He is obviously an expert on wine, spirits and good food. A thoroughly good egg. It was an inspired stop.

Afterwards we visited the very lovely St Peter’s Church to discover a display of Nativity Scenes in a colourfully and beautifully decorated church. There were sixty nine scenes, most of them locally owned, though originating from many parts of the world. They were artfully displayed in an obviously well loved parish church.

House names

We have made and positioned a new and bolder sign for the Vicarage, to be visible as you travel down Pilley Hill. In part this is because of our own difficulty in finding people’s houses when we are out visiting. “In a perfect world” said Rory Sutherland in a recent Spectator, “every house would be numbered — with odd numbers on one side, even numbers on the other.....” How dull. Who would want to live in “a perfect world” like that? Thank God for the challenge of eccentricity, difference, oddity and even a measure of inefficiency and obstructionism.

(67) “This and That” - 14 December, 2014

Last week we were given Crockford’s Clerical Directory for 2012-2013. A friend who had updated her copy left the old one on our doorstep. Crockford’s contains the details of all English, Welsh and Irish benefices and churches as well as very brief biographies of around 26,000 clergy.

Nosy parkers

Diana and I spent a happy hour or so looking up the names of clergy we have lost contact with, to find their addresses and more. Those not listed we presumed to have died. We also looked up some local clergy to find out where they went to university, where they were trained and what positions they have held over the years. So much can be inferred from so little. A series of short incumbencies could mean rapid preferment or a prickly and unbearable personality. To have been trained at Oak Hill or Wycliffe Hall almost certainly indicates an Evangelical, at St Stephen’s House or Mirfield, an Anglo Catholic. All sorts of shades in between can be inferred or speculated about from other colleges and appointments. There was no entry for me of course. In 2012 I was still parish priesting

among the flies and kangaroos of Australia. My son and his wife are there, although not in their present appointments.

Grammar Schools

When I arrived back in England from Tristan da Cunha I was nearly eleven. We rented a house in my father's home town of Belper, in Derbyshire. We lived there for nine months before moving on to Rhodesia.

To balance its fame as the fountainhead of all the world's Neaums, Belper is notorious for having been represented in parliament from the year of my birth in 1945 until 1970 by George Brown. Not everyone's favourite politician, he did nonetheless achieve much from humble beginnings. As many will remember, his serious drink problem proved advantageous to his rival Harold Wilson, who became Prime Minister. "The Times" batted for George by declaring "Lord George-Brown drunk is a better man than the Prime Minister sober."

While in Belper my younger brother and I went to "Long Row Primary School". We settled in easily and well. I took my 11 plus exam there, but left for Rhodesia before getting my results. Would I have made it to a Grammar School or not?

Guinea Fowl Boys High School

In Rhodesia I ended up at Guinea Fowl Boys High School. This was a state boys' boarding school (whites only of course, in those segregated days) set in the bush, ten miles from Gweru.

As with most English grammar schools, white schools in Rhodesia tended to be run on English public school lines. In Guinea Fowl's case this was a not unsuccessful attempt at making a silk-purse from a sow's ear. Most of my fellow pupils were fairly rough miners and farmers sons. Discipline was strict, fair, sometimes brutal and largely effective. The prefect system was adhered to with some fervour. I remember with particular amusement and some distaste how coarser prefects required their little first year "skivvies" to warm a lavatory seat for them on cold winter's mornings by sitting on it.

As well as the expected rugby and cricket fanaticism, all senior boys were required to participate in the cadet corps, with a teacher of Afrikaans, "Zonks" Badenhorst, yelling commands at us in a heavy accent as we shouldered our ancient, bayoneted .303 rifles and marched for the sake of marching, in spit and polished boots, puttees and blancoed belts.

The school's pupils came from all over the place and were a robustly normal mob. A good percentage of them were of Afrikaans stock who imparted to me not only a generous selection of Afrikaans words and slang, but also a certain respect for their basic humanity and decency which belies the world's contempt of Afrikaners as the architects of apartheid.

In providing a model for the rough state school that served me well, English public schools perhaps achieved, simply by example, what Mr Milliband wishes to force upon them by financial constraints. A good example is one of the most effective ways of making a difference in life.

Last Sunday evening all the lights were turned off in Salisbury Cathedral. It signalled the beginning of the annual Advent Carol Service “*From Darkness to Light*”. There was a half moon outside, so the cathedral’s gloom was not quite total. From our position in the north transept I gazed up and around in awe at gothic arch upon gothic arch and stone tracery upon stone tracery, gleaming faintly in dim moonlight. I more than half regretted the ceremony’s depicted triumph of light over darkness. Darkness was mystery and beauty. My mother claimed to prefer children with “a bit of the devil in them.” Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* rivals God for our sympathies. Darkness has its blessings.

The light when it did arrive and begin to move and spread to defeat the darkness was candlelight. The gentlest and loveliest of all lights. Yet it was the darkness that breathed God to me more intensely.

There were seventeen hundred people in the congregation and hundreds upon hundreds of candles on the move in procession, as well as static in great candelabras. The organ gently lullabied and mightily thundered. The singing was glorious, the readings apposite. Christianity is not dead. It can still convey beauty and truths beyond telling.

Funerals

We are in the middle of a run of funerals at present. I wonder how many I have conducted since I was ordained. In my last two parishes we averaged easily forty five a year, nearly all of them done by me. I must have buried around nine hundred people in my time then, possibly more.

It is a great privilege to do so and nearly always rewarding. I attempt to make each one personal and above all authentic. Sentimental clap trap, platitudes and lies, on such momentous occasions I abhor.

Telling the truth at a funeral

I love the story of the country vicar in whose parish there happened to reside a particularly vile individual, who was universally hated and not without cause. There was no one in the village he hadn’t cheated, and few he had not insulted. Eventually, as happens, he died. It was left to the local undertaker and the Vicar to organise his funeral. “What am I going to say about him?” worried the Vicar. “How am I to make his funeral positive and hopeful?”

It was only during the funeral itself that inspiration came to him. The whole village turned up for the ceremony, as they did for every funeral. At the appropriate moment the Vicar said: “Would someone please come forward to pay a tribute to the deceased? No one should depart this life without a few charitable words said on their behalf.” There was a stony silence. No offer came. The Vicar tried again: “Please, please, will someone come forward to pay a tribute to the deceased?” Again there was no offer. His brow perspiring, the now desperate Vicar made one more plea and to his unutterable relief the wise and highly respected headmaster of the local village school made his way to the front. He could be relied upon to find something positive to say about the deceased. He stood at the lectern, cleared his throat and said, before returning to his place, “His brother was even worse!”

Solemn fun

C S Lewis, shortly before he died, wrote a letter to Sister Penelope C.S.M.V in which he said, among other things: “.....*What a pleasant change to get a letter which does not say the conventional things! I was unexpectedly revived from a long coma, and perhaps the almost continuous prayers of my friends did it - but it would have been a luxuriously easy passage, and one almost regrets having the door shut in one's face. Ought one to honour Lazarus rather than Stephen as the protomartyr? To be brought back and have all one's dying to do again was rather hard. When you die, and if 'prison visiting' is allowed, come down and look me up in 'Purgatory'. It is all rather fun—solemn fun—isn't it?*”

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