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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (June 2015)



Taroudant Morocco
(See Article 92 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 **June 2015** 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 June, 2015

The squirrels are winning. Our newest defensive contraption is a twenty four foot wire strung between two eight foot high posts. The bird feeders are suspended from the wire at least ten feet from either post.

Houdini

It turns out that squirrels are accomplished high wire performers. They can crawl delicately on top of the wire, much faster upside down beneath the wire and even faster sliding along underneath with a push. To confound them we have put spinning baffles on the wire near each post, a flexible plastic barrier on each post top and a string of bottles to stop lateral leaps from the posts.

This deters some, but there is one tail-flicking, athletic Houdini, of evil demeanour, who tries, and tries and tries until he succeeds. We were hugely entertained for half an hour watching him climb the post, leap round the baffles only to miss the wire eleven times. He succeeded in the end though. Back to the drawing board. What a joy it all is. If there is one thing our granddaughters will remember about their English visit, it is flying squirrels.

Children in the Vicarage

During the month of June the Vicarage on Pilley Hill has been baptized by the happiness, laughter and sometimes anguished cries of little ones. It brings to mind the first parsonages of my priestly life. They too were enriched, blessed and frazzled by the lives and loves of children.

The first was the Rectory at All Saint's Church Gatooma, in Rhodesia. There, to the sound of cicadas and beneath glorious jacaranda and flamboyant trees, two little boys called Peter and David came into being and began to grow into personhood.

The second was the fine, early nineteenth century Vicarage of St Paul's Cathedral on the Island of St Helena. There, under wind-soughing branches, blurred with epiphytic growth upon which fairy terns nested, a little girl called Elizabeth came into lovely being.

She was followed by the finest of little Australian sheilas, Rachel, born into a temporary, prefabricated curate's house, but shortly thereafter baptizing and blessing, with her three siblings, the less than commodious but pleasantly situated Rectory at Skipton, west of Ballarat. Then there was a substantial Rectory in the pleasing town of Ararat, with a grapevine-lined, high street and lovely view of Langi Giran mountain. Finally, before the great dispersion to university and beyond, the Rectory of Wodonga rocked and rollicked with their often untidy but always stimulating presence.

So the fine Vicarage on Pilley Hill is in good company. It too, this month, has rejoiced in, as well as been frazzled by the presence of four little ones, the next generation. Thomas the youngest, one year old, furrow-browed, determined, intelligent and an excellent trencher man. Henrietta, three years old, heart-stoppingly lovely, her smile, like the sun, warming and lightening the world. Susan, highly imaginative and whimsical and with already the beginnings of a subtle sense of humour, Meg, seven years old, already a guardian and mother to her sisters, but with a well developed sense of mischief. While often demanding, they have blessed us beyond measure.

Boredom once more

For years I have touted boredom as a virtue, as a good reason for going to church. This is not original. There are many learned treatises on boredom. Some, like me, tout its virtues, not least

in developing imagination. So a boring sermon could be a greater blessing than an interesting one.

However, it has not all been boredom in church for me, down through the years. There have been moments of high comedy. Suppressed mirth with a like minded, irascible colleague was intense enough to rattle our pew for five minutes at a retreat Eucharist once. There have been moments too of cathartic anguish and grief as well as of sublimity and vision. Life-changing decisions have been generated in my pew and intellectual and aesthetic stimulation of a very high order, also peace, tranquillity and a sense of well being as well as much genuine devotion and love. This is so too for all of us. I love going to church.

(94) “This and That” - 21 June, 2015

Among our more unusual church attenders at St John’s and St Nicholas’ are dogs. Pam Hughes fine black spaniel Poppy accompanies her to the Wednesday Eucharist at St Nicholas’ and sits with her in the choir on Sundays at St John’s. She appears to be as attentive as any human being.

Praying paws

At one of my pretty little bush churches in Australia, St Luke’s, Dookie, a delightful parishioner called Janet similarly enriched the company of the faithful on Sunday mornings by bringing along a brown spaniel called Gracie. She was as gentle, affectionate and well behaved as Pam’s Poppy. Robert Jackson sometimes brings his terrier Molly along to Evensong. Should they be included in the attendance register? That is the question.

Janet in Dookie once told me that her brother Martin, a priest here in England, looked after a small church on Dartmoor for a while. On his first Sunday a handful of parishioners was augmented by the presence of a pet dog. Like Pam’s and Robert’s friends, it behaved impeccably. Quietly and intelligently it sat observing carefully the priest, who avoided catching its eye in case doing so excited it in any way. A wise priest. You might have noticed that I am similarly careful never to catch the eye of Jeremy Utton while preaching or conducting a service in St John’s. It might well cause him to bark, whimper or frolic on his hind legs.

The following Sunday, to Martin’s faint surprise, there were two women with a pet dog each in attendance. Both dogs sat up intelligently paying careful attention to the service. Again he avoided meeting their eyes.

Communicating paws

On the next Sunday, to Martin’s surprise and mild alarm there were three dogs in attendance, enough to raise even St Francis’ eyebrows. Worse was to follow. When the time came for Communion, one of the women brought her dog up to the rail. It stood there beside her and naturally enough Martin ignored it while he gave its owner the sacramental bread. Whereupon she gave the sacrament to her dog and reached out for another herself.

Martin wrote to his bishop asking him what should be done about the wilful giving of communion to a dog who was not even baptized, let alone confirmed. I never heard the Bishop’s reply.

Robert and Janet, please note, no communion for Poppy and Molly without baptism, confirmation and the Bishop’s permission.

Musical metaphors

I listen to a Haydn piano trio as I write. It is an insult to Haydn to use his lovely music as

mere background. It is also possibly an insult to any readers of this article to be treated so casually as to have only half my mind on what I am writing.

The mind's ability to do more than one thing at a time is impressive. We can drive a car, hold a conversation and relish an apple all at once. I remember reading many years ago that when listening to music, the ear and mind together can at one time only grasp two melodic lines and a little bit of a third. So to listen to a five part fugue means missing at least half of what is going on. Though there is enormous pleasure in switching attention from melodic line to melodic line and great satisfaction in an awareness of more going on than one can fully grasp. When there occurs a five part chordal pause or conclusion, a sense of the divine totality is momentarily grasped.

So too with life. God is a constant, comforting, delighting, exciting, joy-imparting, rich melodic line in life's daily polyphony, whether we are fully aware of it or not.

Part of a life of faith's pleasure lies in giving our attention to different melodic lines, while always at least faintly aware of the divine melody that is the thrumming ground bass that upholds and gives coherence to all the others.

(93) "This and That" - 14 June, 2015

A gift from our Australian family, staying with us at the Vicarage for the month of June, is to see the familiar through unfamiliar eyes. They delight in so much that we too easily take for granted.

A ballerina's tutu

The Vicarage, facing sunnily south, is a lovely place to live. Every significant window looks out over a gravelled forecourt above a great sweep of lawn that slopes down to a tiny stream. Behind this is a great foliage tsunami of oak, hazel, rhododendron and laurel rearing high up to the sky.

On the forecourt each morning, at present, there gambol and lollop a mother rabbit and two kits. Jays, jackdaws, chaffinches, dunnocks and robins forage among the small stones for seed that is scattered from a variety of feeders by profligate and messy eaters like nuthatches and blackbirds. The feeders hang from a crossed wooden pole. It is dressed in a tatty, but ingeniously and elaborately constructed ballerina's pancake tutu. This is our latest defence against squirrels and appears to be working.

To open the curtains each morning onto such a variety of birds, as well as rabbits, squirrels, the chance of a deer or fox and against a backdrop of so many shades of verdant leafiness delights everyone. Although "in June he changeth his tune" we heard the cuckoo's full summer call from the garden for the first time last week.

To allow oneself to see things through the eyes of others is an essential part of empathy and is part of successful and happy living. It broadens sympathies, disarms conflict and enables friendship.

A family baptism

On Saturday we attended the baptism of Thomas Geoffrey Neaum in the oldest church in Cambridge, St Benet's. A lovely occasion, not least because it was the first gathering of all my children and grandchildren for over six years. It was a beautifully conducted ceremony, with some robust hymn singing from a good congregation and a lovely Bruckner motet sung by members of

the choir of St Catharine's College. Thomas was a well behaved and interested recipient of the great sacramental gift that is baptism. Gathering together scattered families can be a difficult and all to rare event. It is to be cherished when it happens.

Embarrassment in the maternity home

My appointment to Boldre could well be the first in which the number of weddings exceeds the number of funerals. This is mildly surprising. Our graveyard is very beautiful, the most attractive of sites to lay one's bones to rest, and our congregation and district are more elderly than otherwise. Nonetheless, baptisms as well as weddings look like exceeding funerals. Only half the year has gone by though. It could still be a close run thing.

Boldre is also the first parish in which I have not been required to visit a hospital every week. As a curate in Harare Cathedral my special hospital bailiwick was a large and busy Maternity Home. I was not infrequently called out in the middle of the night to baptize tiny, premature incubated babies with a dropper. My favourite Maternity Home story comes from Catherine Benson and was submitted to the Spectator's weekly competition a good number of years ago:

My first baby was a week old but I'd been in hospital longer. Exhausted by the whole physicality of breastfeeding (the nurses had dubbed me Mrs United Dairies). I was fast asleep during the doctor's morning round. The gentle hand shaking my shoulder half woke me. I took it, placed it on one of my united dairies, said, "cuddle me, darling," and turned over. The laughter woke me up. The doctor, his hand still clamped by mine and pulled across me, was grinning. The nurses were grinning. I released the doctor and shot under the covers. He gently peeled the covers back, asking how long I'd been in hospital. I said, "Eleven days," face red as a beetroot. He said, "I think we'd better send you home to your husband then." I feigned a dignified silence in front of the knowing smiles around me.

(92) "This and That" - 7 June, 2015

For 28 years in Africa I was waited upon by servants. Most of them were delightful, good humoured, efficient and needful of and grateful for their employment.

Authority in service

Back again in Africa a couple of weeks ago, in Taroudant, Morocco, I was once more in the hands of delightful servants. We were waited upon hand and foot by Abdelilah and Fatima. As with God in the life of a Christian, their benign presence was gentle and understated, content to be unnoticed and unacknowledged and yet essential to our enjoyment, comfort and peace of mind.

Jesus of Nazareth, interestingly and radically characterised himself a servant. Not demeaningly though. He was no obsequious or resentful tigger of the forelock. Nor was Abdelilah. He too was a man of authority. We deferred more to him than he to us.

He is a man of many and varied talents. Most of the paintings on the walls of *Dar Louisa* are by him, and his artistic flair was even more evident in his imaginative and beautifully presented, Moroccan meals. Informative, tri-lingual, generous both with gifts and his time, he was always available to guide and lead us to interesting places, and to ensure that we were not cheated in haggling and bargaining. A truly splendid fellow. A servant whose authority rested upon outstanding ability, utter integrity and inexhaustible kindness.

Hophni, Phinehas and Ichabod

In our daily readings at Matins we have now started on the *First and Second Books of Samuel*. I love them. Some of the raciest early history and saga ever written. The compilers of the 1928 lectionary that we use for our daily office bible reading are a trifle prissy. They tend to leave out the most gory or unsavoury bits. Diana and I won't have this. We include them with relish.

This morning we read of the capture of the *Ark of the Covenant* by the Philistines. The Israelites had superstitiously taken it into battle with them. They imagined that its presence would ensure victory. It did not. They were soundly defeated. Hophni and Phinehas, the two wicked priest sons of Eli, were killed. Phinehas' pregnant wife was shocked into premature labour at the news and died herself after giving birth to a baby boy she called *Ichabod*. This means "*The Glory has Departed*", in reference to the capture of the Ark. *Ichabod* was a favourite expostulation of my mother whenever anything at all inglorious happened .

The capture of the *Ark of the Covenant* brought little but trouble to the Philistines. They were plagued by what the King James Bible calls *emerods* as well as hordes of mice. *Emerods* is an old word for haemorrhoids. To placate the God of the Israelites and end the plague they sent the Ark back to Israel on a cart, with golden images of mice and *emerods*. What a story. I once set it to verse, in ballad metre. Modern translations translate the Hebrew word for *emerods* as tumours. Sadly, probably rightly.

I deeply love the Bible, not least its often primitive, sometimes blood thirsty and down right shocking parts. I was brought up saying Matins and Evensong with my parents and so have known the bible more entirely than many folk from an early age. Perhaps this is why I have never seriously been tempted to worship it as literal or infallible historic truth. It deserves better.

How to read the Bible

In Morocco I read an exhilarating book by A N Wilson: *The Book of the People: How to Read the Bible*. In it he dismisses the sterile approach of what he calls the "archaeological" school, that forever searches after historical proof that what is reported in the bible actually took place. Any attempt to "get behind" the New Testament and somehow produce the historical Jesus is a fool's errand, he maintains. Nor, however, is the bible no more than story, mere fiction. The truth lies somewhere in between. What fundamentalists, both religious and non-religious, fail to see, he says, is "the living power of Myth". The Bible is "not proved or disproved by a sceptic poring over its pages in a study. Rather, it is enacted, when people such as Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu are enflamed by it." Hear hear.

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