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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2015)



From the Vicarage front window



From the Vicarage back window

*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 **July 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” - 26 July, 2015

Visits to art galleries need to be specific and fleeting. Indigestion sets in after viewing twenty or thirty paintings. At which point one’s fellow visitors become more interesting than the works of art.

It is the same in church if the sermon is too long, or Te Deum too tedious. Then counting the freckles on the back of the bald head in front of us becomes all absorbing.

The Tate Modern in Pilley

In our increasingly secular society, art galleries are becoming the churches and temples of the middle class. Francesca Gavin in a Guardian article some years ago wrote: *visiting a major gallery is like stepping into a 21st century cathedral. Tate Modern's awesome cavernous space echoes religious architecture. The former power station's towers resemble steeples pointing heavenward, albeit through the titanium tinted spectacles of high modernism. The classical pillars of the National Gallery aren't very different to St Paul's cathedral. Even the simple, small White Cube galleries in east London are like Friends Meeting Houses or puritan chapels.*

In Pilley the next best thing to the Tate Modern is the Vicarage. A spacious dwelling and a privilege to live in, the Vicarage, like the Tate Modern, is not particularly beautiful to behold. Its forecourt, however, like the three great tanks beneath the Tate Modern, has now been converted into a setting for imaginative “installations”.

Eat your heart out Damien Hirst

Its present exciting installation is a significant and daring work by a fascinating and hugely creative duo known locally as Diana and Andrew.

It consists of two leaning, eight foot tall, triangular wooden poles. Twenty four feet apart, they are connected to each other by a single green wire. This forms a necklace that is imaginatively decorated with transparent, plastic-bottle baubles that spin should a squirrel land on any of them. There are also two, green plastic-bottle baubles ingeniously weighted with just the right amount of pebbles to ensure that they sit on the wire perpendicularly. They prevent squirrels from making so speedy a dash along the necklace that they defeat the squirrel-toppling spin of the other baubles. In the centre of the necklace hang five beautifully-ugly pendants that are attractive to woodpeckers, tits, nuthatches, gold finches and many more feathered friends.



Vicarage residents can hardly wrest their eyes from this imaginative work of art. It is far more than merely decorative though. It is also splendidly functional. It has foiled and thoroughly bamboozled the squirrels. Eat your heart out Cornelia Parker and Damien Hirst.

John Humphrys and Tim Farron

Last week, near St Leonard’s, we passed a farmhouse with an impressive dovecote attached to its roof. Perched right outside one of the cote’s entrances was a smug sparrow hawk. What a fluttering there must have been inside the cote. Like that in mother church over John Humphrys’ grilling of Tim Farron about asking God for guidance in making decisions.

I have no quarrel with Humphrys' actual questions. It is the assumptions behind them, and that they should ever even have been asked that gives me pause for thought.

Christians, other than the most naive, do not expect or desire God's guidance to be dictated to them, or to be direct and specific. Rather their prayer is expressive of a loving relationship with the divine, as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. This relationship, articulated and strengthened in prayer, encourages the values of Jesus' "Kingdom of God" to suffuse, inform and inspire their own values and life.

So praying Christians have a regularly reinforced awareness of the dignity and worth of every individual, as well as of the call to forgive and to love one's neighbour as oneself. They are likely as well to take account of Jesus' strictures on the love of mammon and so lean towards putting people and human relationships above mere wealth.

Men of straw

Media secularists, like Humphrys, build a straw man from lowest common denominator Christianity in order the more easily to call it into question. It is like holding up Pol Pot as typical exemplar of atheism, stupid. If atheism was as foul as that, no one would be one. It is not.

(98) "This and That" - 19 July, 2015

A dying woman once said to me from her death bed, "*What really sh*ts me off about dying is that I shall never be a widow.*"

A fascinating comment. I have never forgotten it. She loved her husband, she really did, but nonetheless had been looking forward to a few years of freedom from the encumbrance of him.

Anyone who has been cruelly abandoned by someone they love, remember the dying woman's sentiments. As soon as possible be done with pining. Relish your freedom.

Few of us are altogether impressive once known well and seen right through. We enter marriage so ignorant of each other and with so many illusions, it is inevitable that a degree of disillusion should creep up on us as the years go by.

Commendable realism

I once counselled a friend who had been caught by his wife having an affair. I suggested that life, as a rule, does not allow us both to have our cake and eat it. That he would have to make a choice between his wife and his lover. He replied, after reflection, that he might as well stay with his wife, if she would forgive him, because in three years time his relationship with his paramour would be little different from that he enjoyed with his wife already.

A commendable realism this. It acknowledged the truth of Dr Johnson's famous dictum that a second marriage represents the triumph of hope over experience. Thirty years later he is still married to his first wife and more than reasonably happily so.

One of Christianity's underlying truths is that we are not granted existence in order to be happy. Rather, we are here to learn to be good. That is to learn to die to self and so to love. Happiness is sometimes, but by no means always, a lovely, gifted by-product of this pursuit of goodness.

Good company

Goodness, in the Christian sense, is too often given a bad press. It is portrayed as narrow-minded wowsery and finger-pointing judgmentalism. As a repressive denial inimical to joy and enjoyment. It is nothing of the sort. Often heroic and always admirable, authentic

goodness, when encountered, makes for exhilarating good company, not least for being selfless. W H Auden, in “A Certain World” writes: *I have met only two persons, one a man, the other a woman, who convinced me that they were persons of sanctity. Utterly different in character, upbringing and interests as they were, their effect on me was the same. In their presence I felt myself to be ten times as nice, ten times as intelligent, ten times as good-looking as I really am.*

Emotional turbulence

In the context of marriage the pursuit of goodness usually (though not always) involves staying married and learning to love someone who in many ways is proving to be profoundly unlovable. This is love of a far more impressive and beautiful sort than the great, lightning-charged cumulus clouds and emotional turbulence we call “being in love” .

Susannah Prout

For many of the long-married, on the far side of disillusion, there lies the gentle, golden sunlight of a love that loves and has loved through shared experience good and bad, disagreement, argument and disillusion. A love that has loved someone in spite of and even because of his or her all too apparent faults, foibles and weaknesses. James Thurber said: A lady of forty-seven who has been married twenty seven years and has six children knows what love really is and once described it for me like this: ‘Love is what you’ve been through with someone’. The poet says it best though. This time Walter de la Mare in an epitaph entitled: “Susannah Prout”:

*Here lies my wife,
Susannah Prout;
She was a shrew
I don't misdoubt:
Yet all I have
I'd give, could she
But for one hour
Come back to me.*

(97) “This and That” - 12 July, 2015

Is a refusal to pay one’s debts acceptable or even laudable? The “anti-austerity” movement, in suggesting that it is, could well be moved more by sentiment than morality.

A heroic debtor

In 1825 there was a banking crisis in Britain that ruined Sir Walter Scott. He was the sole financial partner of a company that collapsed. It left him debts to the tune of about nine million pounds in today’s money.

He refused to declare himself bankrupt or to accept financial assistance from his many admirers. Instead he handed over his house and income to a trust belonging to his creditors and resolved to write his way out of debt. He wrote novel after novel after novel as well as a biography of Napoleon. When he died in 1832, he still owed money, but his novels continued to sell, and the debts still owed by his estate were fully discharged shortly thereafter.

In praise of the middle class

WH Auden, in his most enjoyable commonplace book “A Certain World” praises Walter Scott as a hero and exemplar of the middle class as follows:

In spite of Belloc’s description of Lord Heygate as:

*The sort of peer who well might pass
For someone of the Middle-Class,*

the label does not, thank God, carry with it the pejorative associations of the label 'bourgeois'. Both in France and England, until very recently, nearly all the writers, painters, composers, scientists, and philosophers came from this class, but we do not, like our unfortunate French colleagues, have to apologise for the fact.

One may sneer as one will at its narrow-mindedness, its repressions, its dullness, but let it be remembered that it was the middle-class who first practised, if it did not invent, the virtue of financial honesty, the first class to be scrupulous about paying bills and taxes. The aristocracy paid its gambling debts but not its tailors' bills; the poor stole.

We even have our martyr, Sir Walter Scott, who, when made bankrupt through no fault of his own, worked himself to death to pay off his creditors. In our modern economy it seems unlikely that the middle-class morality about money will be able to survive. I, for example, was brought up never to buy anything until I had the cash to pay for it. If everyone did the same, i.e., bought nothing on credit, our economy would go smash.

The best of low-lifers

The "low life" columnist in The Spectator is called Jeremy Clarke. I love his column and have a soft spot for the sprinkling of "low-lifers" who down through the years have enlivened and enriched many of my congregations.

Jeremy Clarke sometimes goes to church. In a recent column he gives a dryly droll, slightly sceptical, but not unsympathetic account of a church service he not long ago attended. He is amusing on "giving the peace", moving out of his pew to plunge *into the orgy of cheek-pecking and hand-shaking* with gusto.

He repeats one of the vicar's jokes: *A man dies and turns up at the pearly gates carrying a bag of gold bars. If all else fails, he intends bribing his way into Heaven. As St Peter is taking down his particulars, a passing angel peeps into his bag. The man proudly opens the bag wider to reveal the extent of the contents. 'Oh,' sniffs the angel disdainfully, 'paving slabs.'*

Jeremy finishes his account: *At the end the vicar invited us forward for Holy Communion. I went and knelt at the rail but hadn't the nerve to accept the wafer and asked the vicar for a blessing instead. He was delighted. Without hesitation, he thanked God for my kindness in looking after my mother and asked that God would help me with my 'writing'. Quite unaccountably, the directness and simplicity of his prayer swept the rug of humorous scepticism from under my feet. And as I returned, unmanned, to my pew, the faces of the congregation and the church interior were increasingly blurred.*

(96) "This and That" - 5 July, 2015

We went to the theatre in Guildford last Saturday night to see Alan Bennet's *The History Boys*. It is a witty, moving play and was very well done. One of the principle actors happens to be a neighbour and friend of Diana's daughter Martha's family and a pleasing acquaintance of ours as well.

Having been an English teacher myself for two years in Rhodesia, I am glad that none of the yokels I taught seem ever to have achieved literary fame or fortune. I cannot imagine any sympathetic accounts of me as a teacher. They might even reveal their nickname for me and so cause its re-attachment. We did have a lot of fun, but my teaching left a great deal to be desired.

Anglicanism insulted

There was much fun in the staff room too. The deputy head was an Afrikaner who took some pride in his nickname *Hitler*. We could never decide whether his little moustache and flat quiff were the result of the nickname, its cause, or an indication of fascist leanings. I was friendly with the head of the history department, whose father, like me, was a man of the cloth, though Presbyterian. One morning my 3a class clattered into my room straight from history. When settled, a bright and pleasing student called Möllenkramer said: *Sir, Mr Steward asked us to inform you that he had told us that the Anglican Church was spawned in a syphilitic bed of adultery. Is that true Sir?* An adequate response in defence of my beloved Anglicanism to a class of derisive jabs was well nigh impossible, but I did my best, excoriating John Knox.

A waste of space

I cannot remember ever myself being searingly insulted. When I was a lad, my brother and sister sometimes had a good go at me, but they never said anything vicious enough seriously to injure my ego, wound me permanently or for me to recall with a blush. They sometimes called me “*Daddy’s little blue-eyed boy*”, but that is as much a compliment as an insult.

I don’t recollect ever being called even “a waste of space”. Doubtless because it is so obviously untrue. Churches are sometimes deemed to be a waste of space though, possibly with some reason. Locked up all day and every day, many are open only for an hour or two each Sunday. That surely is a waste of space. Could and should they not be put to better and more extensive use?

It is good that we are able to keep St John’s, open every day of the week. This means that although there are few, if any, services during the week, the church is by no means unused. People of all sorts and types, believers and non believers, pop in to be refreshed and to delight in its tranquillity and loveliness. Moreover, it enhances the countryside, such is its beauty. To so grace the landscape, to so beautify the space it occupies is to be wonderfully useful.

Glorious swan song

Our Patronal Festival Evensong was glorious. There were around forty in the choir from local parish choirs as far afield as Amesbury. Parry’s *I was Glad* and soaring descants enabled the church to doff its roof in honour of John the Baptist and God. A splendid swan song for Adrian.

The term swan song for a final effort or performance given just before death or retirement is based on an ancient though erroneous belief that swans sing a beautiful song in the moment just before death, having been silent during their life. It enables me to close by quoting the words set famously and exquisitely to music by Anglicanism’s finest composer, Orlando Gibbons, and possibly written by him as well:

*The silver Swan, who, living, had no Note,
when Death approached, unlocked her silent throat.
Leaning her breast upon the reedy shore,
thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:
“Farewell, all joys! O Death, come close mine eyes!
More Geese than Swans now live, more Fools than Wise.”*

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