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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2015)**



**Fairy Penguins - The smallest penguins of all**  
(see article 109 below - Photo: Australian Broadcasting Corporation)

*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 **October 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>

## (112) “This and That” - 25 October, 2015

After our early morning walk, Diana and I say matins together. One of the most enjoyable parts of this is reading the psalms appointed for the day.

### Shocking

We do not leave out those that are full of cursing, hatred and vengeance, though invited to do so in the 1928 version of the Book of Common Prayer. The most shocking is Psalm 137. An exquisite beginning exaggerates the shock of an appalling end: *By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept: when we remembered thee, O Sion. As for our harps, we hanged them up upon the trees that are therein....How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* Beautiful. These are words that deeply resonate in the heart of anyone exiled from a beloved home or homeland, be they Syrian or Iraqi Christians, German Jews, or a child left at boarding school for the first time.

The Psalm ends appallingly: *O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery: yea, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee, as thou hast served us. Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children and throweth them against the stones.*

That terrible end was metrically versified by dour Scots Presbyterians as follows:

*Blessed may that trooper be  
Who riding on his naggie  
Takes thy wee bairns by the taes  
And dings them on the craggie.*

We don't leave out the vile parts because a censored psalter is a lying and paltry psalter. Instead we say rather than pray those sometimes terrible words. They are impossible to pray. Sometimes we engage with them critically in discussion, more usually we simply hurry over them.

### Purity And Violence

We do love the psalms though. We regularly pause to savour a mellifluous phrase, comment upon a particular felicity or puzzle over a curiosity. It is the old Prayer Book version we use and love.

I particularly love them sung perfectly to Anglican Chant, preferably unaccompanied. The shocking contrast between the ethereal purity and precision of the voices of a cathedral choir and the often primitive words expressing universal and even more primitive, often violent and yet brutally honest sentiments, is oddly satisfying.

### A Vain Shadow

My oldest son, when he left school, stayed with my father and his grandfather for a year or two. That somewhat dictatorial old priest of a grandfather insisted that he joined him in saying the old Prayer Book version of Matins each morning. My son never admitted to enjoying this. However, he did develop a good and appreciative ear for Coverdale's lapidary prose. It was wondrous to hear an eighteen year old young man, when being upbraided by a parent, quote with a long-suffering look, *"I held my tongue, and spake nothing : I kept silence, yea, even from good words; but it was pain and grief to me...."* Or, when being advised to save rather than spend his money: *"Man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain : he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them."*

### Grin Like A Dog

My mother too loved the psalms, especially the odd or curiously anachronistic bits. When these oddities turned up, as we said Evensong or Matins together as a family, she would say them with an exaggerated relish. She delighted in phrases like *"Sehon king of the Amorites and Og the*

*king of Basan*” and when, in talking of the wicked, the psalmist says “*in the evening they will return, grin like a dog, and will go about the city. They will run here and there for meat and grudge if they be not satisfied....*”

As for me, on a cold winter's day, about forty five years ago, exiled from my African home, lonely among strangers, I sat down by the waters of Westminster, on an Abbey misericord, and heard the choir of Westminster Abbey sing “*Fret not thyself because of the ungodly....*”. It brought me back to full faith and I wept.

## **(111) “This and That” - 18 October, 2015**

Although my mother loved birds and instilled a love of them in me, she was not at all partial to house sparrows. This, oddly, was because the colour of their plumage reminded her, she said, of cold meat. She disliked cold meat and so sparrows, collateral damage, were disliked as well.

She might also have been influenced by my father’s opinion of her legs. No mighty pistons these, they were somewhat thin. He used to maintain, jocularly rather than cruelly, that she had “*tossed with a sparrow and lost.*”

### **Impulsive improvisations**

A friendly undertaker in Australia told me once about the funeral of a keen breeder of aviary birds. As the parson began his homily a sparrow happened to stray into the church and flutter among the rafters. A good improviser, the parson drew everyone's attention to it. “*Look! A sparrow. How wonderful! Wouldn't Albert, with his great love of little birds, rejoice to have one fluttering around as if paying its last respects to him at his funeral?*”

Such impulsive improvisations can be dangerous. Everyone in the congregation, except the parson, was well aware that Albert passionately hated sparrows. They stole his birds' food and brought them disease. He despatched them with brutal efficiency.

### **The Sparrow's Friend**

The first church of which I was rector in Rhodesia had air vents along the high peak of its roof. Standing on little stilts they were painted green to match the roof's corrugated iron and had little peaked, iron caps. Looking up at them from inside the church you often espied the fluffy bottoms of sparrows. They liked to perch on the rim, alongside the little stilts, sheltered beneath the peaked cap from hawks. They added their querulous alleluias to mine during daily matins and evensong, reminding me of psalm eighty four, one of my particular favourites: “*the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young, even thy altars, O Lord of hosts.....*”

Strangely their fluffy bottoms were piously deferential. They never ever dropped droppings into the church below. In looking up at them, therefore, I was spared the fate of Tobit in the Apocrypha. He was blinded by sparrows who “*muted warm dung into his eyes*”! How endlessly fascinating scripture is!

### **The Parson's Friend**

This particular church had an aumbry (a small recessed cabinet in the wall of the sanctuary where consecrated bread is kept to take to the sick or dying). It had a bulb in front of it that emitted a pseudo candle-flicker of light in the shape of a cross. This was to mark our Lord's sacramental presence at the parish's heart, and to help focus attention upon him during prayer and devotion.

I was once showing my best friend over this rather lovely church, and he, being a good Anglo-Catholic, dutifully genuflected to our Lord's sacramental presence as we passed before the flickering bulb. "Oh," I said, "*The aumbry is temporarily empty. There were more people in hospital than usual this morning, but I forgot to turn off the light.*" "Eek!" he responded, crossing himself. "*Blasphemy! I have bowed down to wood and stone.*" Witty I thought.

### **Philip Sparrow**

Back to my feathered friends the sparrows. They are dear to God's heart, Jesus tells us. One of the most fascinating and in some of its parts the loveliest of poems is a long lamentation to a dead pet sparrow called "*Philip*". It is by the outspoken, wild poet, satirist, one time tutor to Henry VIII, enemy of Wolseley, and Rector of Diss in Norfolk, John Skelton (1463-1529). Here is a fragment:

*Lord how he would hop  
After the gressop! (Grasshopper)  
And when I said, `Phip, Phip!'  
Then he would leap and skip,  
And take me by the lip.  
Alas, it will me slo  
That Philip is gone me fro!*

## **(110) "This and That" - 11 October, 2015**

"*Vegetarianism is harmless enough, though it is apt to fill a man with wind and self-righteousness.*" So said Robert Hutchison, back in the nineteen thirties.

### **The fragility of old certainties**

I myself used to dismiss vegetarianism with that adage, but old certainties dilute with age. On the Saturday morning of the Harvest Supper I spent a happy hour making a large vegetarian cottage pie for the occasion. The result, though I say so myself, was better than the real thing.

On our early morning daily walks I pick up a scent, from behind a hedge, that cheers my olfactory organs and sets my mouth watering. Silage. The ultimate yeasty, marmite-like, vegetarian food. It warms the air and my heart. Oh to be an old bull, breaking into a bale of the stuff on a frosty morning. The rich aroma takes me back to the great pits of silage on the Rhodesian farms of my youth. There the treacly, odoriferous concoction was made from green maize. The stalks of which are so sweet they sufficed for sugar cane to farm labourers and young lads like myself.

### **Biblical vegetarianism**

Although I remain an unrepentant and unapologetic omnivore, I am much softer on vegetarianism than used to be the case. Not least because members of our family are full vegetarians. Others tend that way. In catering for them we discover how imaginative and delicious much vegetarian cooking can be.

Christian vegetarians must find the Old Testament, with all its animal sacrifice and blood-stained altars, hard to bear. For solace they can turn to the Book of Daniel. There we learn that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, as well as Daniel, when on a diet of only vegetables and water, were better in appearance and fatter of flesh than all their colleagues who were feasting on the many foods and rich meats of Nebuchadnezzar's table.

The word "vegetarian" is an old Indian word meaning "lousy hunter". Or so it is said.

### **The little Nazarene**

The writer of "The Cloud of Unknowing" in the middle Ages said, "*When you're in a burning house, you say 'Fire!' When you're in the middle of darkness and difficulty, you say 'God!'*" It is easy to dismiss prayer as a waste of time or to discard it as too difficult. What a mistake.

Rowan Williams, asked if it was important for believers in different faiths to pray together, referred to a lovely poem by the Anglican priest David Scott. Its image of the little Nazarene coming and serving a Christian, a Jew and a Muslim being illustrative of “*how somehow in the attempt to be open to God you can arrive at a place where all of you together are – in his image – served by the reality....*”

*from 'Ibn Abbad Woke Early'*

All three went to Paradise,  
Ibn Abbad, Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg,  
and Father Louis, and sat to eat  
at the same table. They drank the water of life  
and ate the meat of friendship. Whenever  
their cups ran dry or their plates were empty  
a little Nazarene came by and filled them up.  
Who are you? they said.  
I am Jesus, son of Mary. Can I sit awhile?  
Be our guest, they said.  
As they sat, the ground beneath them shook,  
their faces paled and their eyes were filled  
with knowledge, and with grief. Today,  
said Jesus, they will hate more and  
love more, than on any other day since  
the world began. Hold hands,  
and ask our God to speak to us  
in Spirit. And there they sat  
in love and prayer, all day, all day,  
Ibn Abbad, Rabbi Schmelke of Nikolsburg,  
Father Louis, and Jesus, Mary's son.  
and their silence was more profound than words  
and their communion was most eloquent  
and they willed the world to peace

## **(109) “This and That” - 4 October, 2015**

On King Island in Bass Strait, many years ago, I lay on a pebble beach with two of my children. The sea gently sighed. Larger waves occasionally crashed. Dusk fell.

### **Fairy Penguins**

Beneath low scrub and bushes behind us were little passages and burrows. As it became really dark, small penguins emerged from them. They stood like miniature Guardsmen, occasionally barking and churring.

On the lip of the steep part of the beach, we became aware of company. A row of fairy penguins, fresh from the sea, crops bulging with mangled fish, were simply standing there, leaning forward and eyeing us. Then slowly, quietly, they shuffled forward. Several of them had to go round us, we were in their way. With what jubilation the returning seafarers were greeted by their mates.

### **The joy of pets**

I remember with joy many animals and pets. A pet penguin, on the island of Tristan da Cunha. A pet mole snake at my bush school in Africa. A pied crow, a succession of budgerigars, cats and dogs. I have kept chameleon eggs in damp soil in a little tub in my study until they hatched into exquisite, tiny baby chameleons to be released. My school holidays were spent

walking the African bush with binoculars, bird watching. In game parks I have rejoiced in lions, elephants, leopards, cheetahs and once, on horseback, almost bumped into a great rhinoceros.

Even today one of the most thrilling of experiences is to discover a bird's nest with a clutch of bright, neat, crisp-shelled eggs in it.

### **A paradox**

Why do we love nature so? Why do we love animals, either wild or as pets? Humankind uses them and even abuses them. They are made to work for us and are killed to feed us. Yet we also love them, are inspired and awed by them, consider cruelty to them a most heinous crime.

There is a contradiction, a paradox to our relationship with animals. It parallels one within ourselves. We all are materialists to some degree or other. Our lives are busied, muddied, cluttered with activities to do with earning a living, acquiring sufficient money and possessions to ensure our own and our family's security and well being.

It is part of the human condition. Yet at our best we do not wish to become obsessively materialistic, to lose sight of different, altogether necessary, complementary values.

The natural world, in its uncomplicated beauty, *the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin, the birds of the air that neither sow nor reap, nor gather in to barns*, remind us that there is more to life than security. There is simplicity, beauty, innocence, and perhaps above all, simply being. Why do we love a daft little dog, a goldfinch, or even a house sparrow? Surely for being simply what or who they are. To acknowledge a creature's beauty and its right simply to be, is the beginning of reverence and awe, which are the impulse to worship.

### **Cat and Bird**

On our verandah in Australia I watched our cat, Twinkle, eye a blackbird pinching its food and was moved to write:

Relaxed, our cat sits still and idle  
On the back verandah seat,  
As plump and glossy blackbirds sidle  
Up to tantalise and eat  
Cat food from the cat's own plate.

With beady eye and scrabbling feet  
They risk and dare and tempt their fate.

The cat, contented, simply purred.  
Wiser far than any bird  
It watched unblinking, hardly stirred,  
Too well aware of how preferred  
Is pet food that has been deferred  
Till ground in gizzard, juiced and blurred  
To feather, flesh and bone of bird.  
Processed into bird by bird!

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