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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (November 2015)



Remembrance Sunday November 8 2015

*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 **November 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>

(117) “This and That” - 29 November, 2015

I regret the paucity of nuns in the Church these days. If there were more of them about, traditionally dressed, there might be less fuss made about the Islamic Hijab.

In his father’s slippers he trod

When we returned from Tristan da Cunha we lived for nine months in my father’s home town Belper in Derbyshire. There was a convent of nuns there. One early morning a week father celebrated the Eucharist for them. As a boy he had served at the altar there at just such a daily Eucharist for his parish priest. So I did likewise for him.

Serving was done properly. I wore a cotta, cassock and little red sanctuary slippers. The priest in those days always celebrated facing east. He would turn to face the people only when addressing them. That is, to absolve, read scripture, invite to communion or bless. When talking to God on the people’s behalf he would face with them, eastwards. I like this, but it has gone completely out of fashion.

Fainting at the altar

At the beginning of the service I would kneel on the altar step on the Epistle side. When the time came to read the Gospel, I would move the Missal to the Gospel side. At the words of consecration I held the priest’s chasuble as he genuflected three times for the bread, then three times for the wine. All very formal and lovely. Once I fainted and was restored to consciousness by kindly nuns with a glass of milk and a piece of cherry cake. I remember it all fondly. At my theological college, long before women priests, there were two nuns studying with us from a nearby convent. They were assiduous and bright students. With one I became friendly and corresponded for a number of years. Much older than me she was lovely and wise.

I have just bought the priest and poet David Scott’s book, “Beyond the Drift” (New and Selected Poems). Published by Bloodaxe Books, it costs £12 and is worth every penny.

His poetry, truly lovely, is intelligent and intelligible. It is gentle, restrained, contemplative, deeply perceptive, full of delightful surprises and insights, very English, and also, I like to think very Anglican. The following poem is all but perfect.

A Nun on the Platform

She seems in place here,
as much as in the convent,
self-contained, neat.
You could hardly call it luggage.

No frantic balancing of cups
but like a swan, which also
has no hands for magazines,
she stands complete.

No intermediate, half unsureness,
no drawing kids back from the edge,
or disappointment over missing,
or expectation of arrival

or a train, leans her,
like the rest of us, out of true.

We are all some distance from our roots
on this platform, but she seems at home,

as her Sisters will be
in the over large garden
reaching for tall fruits,
their thoughts ripening for pardon.

Seeing a nun on a platform
gives the day a jolt,
like an act of kindness,
or a pain that halts.

I love that for many reasons. Not least because it illustrates a truth I hold dear namely, that to see and describe something perfectly requires sympathy and love as well as descriptive genius. The slightly incongruous sight of a nun on a railway platform delighted the poet. It would me. In our increasingly secular society, from which I so often feel alienated, my heart lifts to behold any sign of the faith I love, be it a clerical collar, a church spire, a crucifix, a nun or even a tattooed “Jesus loves me”.

(116) “This and That” - 22 November, 2015

Keeping a journal is useful. My daughter rang the other day wanting to know the name of a book from which I had quoted to her nine years ago.

Bridges of lies

A search of my computerised journal revealed it to have been “*The New World of the Gothic Fox: Culture and Economy in English and Spanish America.*” by Claudio Veliz.

I was also able to find the quotation that so sparked her interest nine years ago. My journal’s entry for the fourth of September, 2006 contains the following: *The book George has left me to read is very interesting on metaphors. It draws a distinction between the “trivial truthfulness” of similes and the “illuminating falsehood” of metaphors, which lead us “towards the truth across bridges built with lies”.*

Metaphors as “*illuminating falsehoods*” leading to the truth across “*bridges built with lies*” is superb.

The George referred to is George Lines, one of my oldest, best and very cleverest of friends. He was an agricultural scientist who worked all over the world for UNESCO for many years. He then became an agricultural consultant in his Australian homeland. He was a regular communicant in my first parish, extremely well read, very witty, pleasingly eccentric, a bon vivant and great raconteur. His wife Robyn is as good a Roman Catholic as he is Anglican. We had some memorable dinner parties at their house.

Happiness and fulfilment

In that journal entry for the fourth of September 2006 I write: *In conversation with George upon one of my favourite themes, that of happiness and fulfilment, he added a little observation to my thesis that happiness and fulfilment, insofar as they are ever attainable, are to be found in the losing of oneself in something or someone totally absorbing and worthwhile. It is the “worthwhile” that disturbs, because is that really necessary?*

Can we really say, for extreme example, that the coprophiliac, when losing himself in the contemplation of a piece of dung, is any less fulfilled and happy than Johann Sebastian Bach lost in the intricacies of a great fugue?

George suggested that lesser or unworthy objects of absorption soon pall and sate. Whereas the good, the true, the worthy and the beautiful lead you on to great and greater and more total absorption. I think that this is so..... Good conversation indeed.

For his seventieth birthday I wrote a twenty stanza panegyric, from which there follow a mere eight of them:

Light Lines on George Lines

For thirteen years I've known the man,
And grown to be his friend and fan,
Relishing his conversation
Learning, wit and cerebration

Both man of God and man of science
He holds together in defiance
Strange paradoxes of a kind
That puzzle those of simpler mind.

He's wise, he's daft, he's strong, he's frail,
Well esteemed, beyond the pale,
His head in clouds, his feet on ground
Madly sane, profoundly sound.

Of all Australians that I've met
On none like him my eyes I've set.
Distinguished looking, twinkling eyed,
His sympathies and interests wide.

Full of facts most recondite,
In conversation a delight,
His wicked tongue controlled in part,
By Robyn and his Christian heart.

He first to my attention drew
As sermon fodder in my pew.
Where if my sermon proved a dud
He'd ruminant his own good cud.

Then after church and over sherry
In the hall and waxing merry,
Sizzling, witty jokes he'd trade
Imported east from Adelaide.....

(115) "This and That" - 15 November, 2015

There are two local pilgrimages I need to make. The first is to the little church of St Andrew's, Bemerton, just outside Salisbury. George Herbert, the finest of priest/poets was Rector there for the last four years of his life. Born in 1593, he died in 1633.

Bemerton near Salisbury

Two of his poems I love beyond telling. The first is his sonnet 'Prayer'. It is a dazzling cascade of twenty seven startling and perceptive images, each encapsulating prayer.

The second is 'The Flower'. This is a poem that resonated deeply when I was recovering from a bereavement. The second stanza goes:

*Who would have thought my shriveled heart
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
Quite underground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.*

The fifth stanza:

*And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. Oh, my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.*

Winterborne Came, near Dorchester

The second place of pilgrimage is to St Peter's Church, Winterborne Came, near Dorchester. This is where the priest and poet William Barnes was Rector from 1862 until he died in 1886.

The son of a Dorset farmer he had little formal education, but was nonetheless an exceptional scholar and polymath. He had mastered 60 languages by the time he died and he established an influential school in Dorchester, developing his own progressive teaching methods. He became a mentor of the young Thomas Hardy.

At the age of 18 he saw an elegant young woman named Julia Miles alight from an omnibus and fell instantly in love with her. The couple were devoted, and her death at the age of 47 prompted the first of many elegies to her. For the rest of his life he closed each day's diary entry with the Italian form of her name: 'Guilia'. He was ordained a priest in 1848.

Most of his poems are written in Dorset dialect, which can be off putting, but they are as lovely as Hardy's novels and poems in their portrayal of ordinary, humble country life, but without Hardy's deep pessimism. This is surely among the very loveliest of all love poems.

With You First Shown to Me

*With you first shown to me,
With you first known to me,
My life-time loom'd, in hope, a length of joy:
Your voice so sweetly spoke,
Your mind so meetly spoke,
My hopes were all of bliss without alloy,
As I, for your abode, sought out, with pride,
This house with vines o'er-ranging all its side.*

*I thought of years to come,
All free of tears to come,
When I might call you mine, and mine alone,
With steps to fall for me,
And day cares all for me,
And hands for ever nigh to help my own;
And then thank'd Him who had not cast my time
Too early or too late for your sweet prime.*

*Then bright was dawn, o'er dew,
And day withdrawn, o'er dew,
And mid-day glow'd on flow'rs along the ledge,
And walls in sight, afar,
Were shining white, afar,
And brightly shone the stream beside the sedge.
But still, the fairest light of those clear days
Seem'd that which fell along your flow'ry ways.*

(114) “This and That” - 8 November, 2015

War is always with us, its horror rubbed into our faces by television, film and radio. We can hardly escape it. We are overburdened by news of it. It is hard to bear.

Courage with a human face

Remembrance Day is different. It neither glorifies war or horrifies with it. It simply remembers it. Especially the human face of war, the face of the individual soldier.

It does so, largely, without any hierarchical distinctions. It is the trooper, the ordinary soldier, as much if not more than anyone else, who is remembered and celebrated.

On Remembrance Day we doff our hats to one of the greatest virtues called forth by war, namely courage. Courage in ordinary human beings. Courage not primarily of the superhuman or extreme sort, but rather of a more general, universal and moderate sort.

Fear, funk and terror

In warfare and extreme danger there is as much fear, funk and terror as there is courage, but it is the courage that moves us. More especially courage with a human face, courage in ordinary fellows, courage in the lads who went off to war from this our own district. Fellows just like those we see knocking around our villages today.

Courage is not so much a virtue in its own right as the precondition for all virtue. You cannot be good in any real sense, without courage. All authentic goodness requires guts and sacrifice. Cowardice, depravity, cruelty and a lack of virtue, are usually (though not quite always) the result of weakness and gutlessness. There is nothing admirable about real evil. It stinks, is vile.

On Remembrance Sunday we look elsewhere. We focus upon courage as a virtue, as the precondition for all virtue, and we allow ourselves to be en-couraged. To be inspired, heartened and strengthened by the courage of those who went off to face death armed with it.

By doing this in our own patch, by focussing our remembrance on the local, on the ordinary lads from our village and district, we are helped to identify courage broadly. We are helped to see it as more general than we do usually. As a part of the armoury of nearly every soldier, not focussed only upon, or in, Victoria Cross variety heroes.

To get the whole world out of bed

This is good, because courage needs to be universal and accessible to us all. It is necessary and essential in every humdrum human life.

The husband, wife, child, all of us, require lashings of it, if we are to lead a good, worthwhile and productive existence. The poet John Masefield in his all but forgotten masterpiece, *The Everlasting Mercy* illustrates the necessity of courage in daily life in four, simple lines:

*To get the whole world out of bed
And washed, and dressed, and warmed, and fed,
To work, and back to bed again,
Believe me, Saul, costs worlds of pain.*

We all of us, in ordinary daily life, need courage to keep us on track and going. Among the folk I minister to in my daily life here in Pilley and Boldre, I see examples of courage in many elderly couples so impressive it all but breaks my heart. The old and feeble heroically caring for the older and more feeble, and remaining cheerful.

Courage demobbed and in civvies

Remembrance Day encourages us to look back, but with the intent of illuminating our present. Courage looked back to in this way *en*-courage us all. Courage is demobbed, casts of its uniform, dons civvies and enters daily life, our daily life, to our inestimable benefit.

This is how best we remember and honour those remembered. We allow them to inspire all of us to keep going in any difficult circumstances imposed upon us. Not necessarily by warfare, but by old-age and increasing decrepitude, perhaps, or by caring for handicapped, or difficult loved ones, or by bringing up and minding little ones.

Thank God for those who from the past inspire us in this way, as well as for those who continue to do so.

(113) “This and That” - 1 November, 2015

I was shaking hands with a formidable looking lady after church one day. Instead of saying, “*Good morning,*” or, “*that was a brilliant sermon, Andrew.*” She said: “*Your shoes are dirty!*”

Barefoot in church

A useful piece of information. A reminder that when people come up to Communion, as often as not, all they see of the priest are shoes. Some sort of an effort needs to be made to ensure that our footgear doesn't distract people, either by dirtiness or idiosyncrasy.

I would much prefer not to wear shoes in church at all. On hot weekdays in Australia, in our small Lady Chapel, I did sometimes celebrate the early, daily Communion in bare feet. Lovely and very biblical. In the Jerusalem Temple priests performed their duties barefoot.

Shoes are dirty things. It is wholly understandable that they should be discarded before entering a holy place. Moses, even outside in the dusty desert before the burning bush, was told to remove his. God was present and the place holy.

Muslims still remove their shoes before entering a Mosque. Even before entering an ordinary house in biblical times you removed your foot-gear. This is becoming more common in our society and culture too.

A clever reversal

The disciples of Jesus were instructed to shake off the dust from their feet as they left any place where people refused to listen to them. This is what all strict Jews used to do when they arrived back in Palestine after travelling abroad. At the border they would take off their sandals and give them a good shake to get rid of all the foreign dirt and filth clinging to them. This was to avoid contaminating the holy land of Israel.

There is a clever reversal of this famous saying of Jesus: *The point of 'shaking the dust off your feet' is that, actually, you can't.* As indeed, you can't. The dust on our shoes has to be rubbed and polished off. It can't be shaken off. More's the pity.

So it is with the dust of cynicism and half-belief, of materialism and self-centredness, of pessimism and despair, of worry and fret, of self-doubt and indecision, of fear and aimlessness. All of which can too easily settle upon us in our daily stomp out and about in the world as disciples, seemingly so very far from the Kingdom of God.

As we stamp our way about we raise a dust which blurs things that really matter. The joy of simplicity's beauty, of sweet self-forgetfulness, of all the small, fragile acts of kindness and love that make life beautiful. The gleam of enchantment is dulled, can't be seen. This dust cloud settles, as it were, upon our shoes. It cannot simply be shaken off, rather it needs wiping, polishing, shining and buffing away. Not least by making an effort to be an active member of the family of God, and so participating fully in the life of the local Church, saying our prayers and mixing with good, loving and forgiving Christian folk.

Blue feet

The first baptism I ever performed was of a little girl who, on a frosty but sunny winter's day in Zimbabwe, screamed from beginning to end. This, it turned out, was not in horror of me or of baptism, but rather because her Dad had been told to put her booties on beneath the christening robe. He had forgotten to do so. Her feet, although appropriately and beautifully bare for such a holy place, were blue. Foot gear is sometimes advisable.

Those once blue little feet will now be adult and pink. Hopefully, baptism having worked its wonders, they will also be as beautiful as those commended by Isaiah, who said *"how beautiful, upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good tidings, who publish peace; who bring good tidings of good, that publish salvation; that say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

Home