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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (May 2017)



Burning Bushes - Furzey Gardens - Hampshire

*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 **May 2017** 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>

(194) “This and That” - 28 May 2017

I have just listened to one of the most jubilant pieces of music ever written: *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen!* (Rejoice unto God in all lands! A sacred cantata by JS Bach.

Virtuosic brilliance

Three years ago the *Netherlands Bach Society* launched a website called *All of Bach*. Every week a work by Bach is uploaded. The choice for the third birthday of the website was a performance of this most festive of festive cantatas.

It is sung by Maria Keohane, glorious of voice and serene of face. A modest orchestra of strings and continuo, is joined in the opening and final arias by a single, virtuosic valveless trumpet. A soaring voice and trumpet duet. Exultation to begin and end. Expressive beauty in between.

The soprano's high C in the *Alleluia* finale stops the heart. Only God is worthy of such virtuosic jubilation. So glorious an offering demands no less a recipient. I listen in gratitude and am convicted. God simply has to be.

[the website: <http://allofbach.com/en/bwv/bwv-51/>]

Out with wanhope and sluggish slumbring

Joy and jubilation are an indispensable part of faith. The gloom and horror of sin, guilt, betrayal, and crucifixion give way to the bright joy of Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost and redemption.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, when it dawned upon Absalom, the parish clerke, that he had kissed his loved one's backside, presented to him derisively at the window in the dark, not her face, he rolled about on the ground in an agony of rage. He rubbed his mouth with dust, sand, straw and chips.

When I first read *The Miller's Tale* as a schoolboy I too rolled about, but in an agony of joy, glee and sheer delight. Years later, as a teacher of English, it delighted me to introduce my pupils to a similar joy and glee in Chaucer's rollicking bawdiness. Joylessness says Chaucer is *a rotten sinne*. In its train follow *slouthe, wanhope and sluggish slumbring*. The sin of joylessness inclines us to *undevotion, through which a man is so blunt that he may neyther rede ne sing in Holy Church*

“I am not religious but very spiritual”

A lot of tosh is talked about religion. Such as the claim of many unchurched folk: *I am not religious but am very spiritual*. The columnist, Theodore Dalrymple is perceptive on the subject: *The reason (I surmise) that so many people claim to be spiritual rather than religious is that being spiritual imposes no discipline upon them, at least none that they do not choose themselves. Being religious, on the other hand, implies an obligation to observe rules and rituals that may interfere awkwardly with daily life. Being spiritual-but-not-religious gives you that warm, inner feeling, a bit like whisky on a cold day, and reassures you that there is more to life—or, at least, to your life—than meets the eye, without actually having to interrupt the flux of everyday existence. It is the gratification of religion without the inconvenience of religion. Unfortunately, like many highly diluted solutions, it has no taste.*

The perfect come back

At the birth of each of his quiver full of children a well to do country squire laid down in his cellar twelve dozen bottles of the best port. Every day his butler, with the aid of a candle and a subtle hand in pulling the cork released the nectar into a Waterford decanter, ensuring that no sediment leaked into the glass. In childhood his children put up with the ceremony. In the mischief of adolescence they decided to call father's bluff. They poured the nectar from his decanter into the rose garden and replaced it with some syrupy rubbish bought from the Coop for a couple of pounds. After dinner they watched as the old man settled again into his port. Nosing it, he said:

Magnificent! Bursting their sides, the children revealed where they had bought it. Unperturbed the old man pressed the bell for his butler. “How long have you worked for me, James?” “Thirty one years, sir.” “You are sacked. You have been selling my Taylor’s 1927 to the Coop.”

(193) “This and That” - 21 May 2017

As children whenever we were silly enough to ask my father what he was trying to do, he’d reply *I am not trying to do anything*. If we asked how he was getting on when he appeared to be struggling with a task, he’d quote William Henley’s poem *Invictus* and say “*I am bloody but unbowed*.” He considered himself an achiever not a trier.

Long John Silver

I admire William Henley, but have reservations about *Invictus*. Especially when read at funerals. To boast at one’s death of having been *master of my fate and captain of my soul* is an arrogant lie. None of us are, or ever have been. Cooperation and mutual dependence characterise successful and beautiful lives. I dislike Frank Sinatra’s *I Did It My Way* for similar reasons.

In the context of Henley’s life, however, *Invictus* is wholly admirable. Born in 1849 he contracted tuberculosis of the bone at the age of 12. Primitive treatment led to a diseased foot being amputated below the knee. Even worse, in order to save his life, his surgeons declared that the other foot too needed to be amputated. With great courage Henley successfully resisted this. He was discharged from hospital in 1875, aged 26, and lived an active, successful and combative life for a further thirty years. His friend, Robert Louis Stevenson based *Treasure Island’s Long John Silver* on him.

Wendy

His frail daughter Margaret also achieved literary immortality. In little girl-speak she referred to J M Barrie as her *Fwiendy Wendy*. So the name Wendy was given to *Peter Pan’s* companion in the children’s classic. Prior to this the name was all but unknown, a mere diminutive of Gwendoline or Wanda. Little Margaret Henley was never able to read the book. She died at the age of six.

In the light of a life of success and achievement against the odds, triumphing *bloody but unbowed* over illness and grief, Henley’s poem *Invictus* is indeed admirable.

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Cabbages

A recent children's talk in church touched on the subject of cabbage. Cabbages are not mentioned in the bible, so how we came to be talking about them is a mystery. I asked the children if they liked the vegetable, assuming that like me and George Orwell they would not. Orwell in *A Clergyman's Daughter* writes with distaste of *the melancholy smell of boiled cabbage and dishwater seeping under a parishioner's front door*. I was wrong. The children liked cabbage. A show of hands from the congregation revealed an all but universal enthusiasm for the vegetable. On the way out of church, with an eye to my conversion, a kindly parishioner pressed an irresistible recipe for cabbage on me.

Judas in the Vicarage garden

A few weeks ago a ghostly, white fallow deer strolled through our garden. It did not linger long enough for a decent photograph. I discover there to be four main colour variants among fallow deer: *common* (chestnut with white mottles), *menil* (more distinct spots and no black on the rump), *melanistic* (black) and *leucistic* (white). The leucistic white deer are known as *Judas deer*. By standing out so visibly they betray their fellows to poachers.

(192) "This and That" - 14 May 2017

The guest preacher at our Patronal Festival Evensong on the 25th of June is to be the Rev Dr David Neaum. He is Chaplain of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. A priest of impeccable academic credentials, but dubious parentage.

Watching television and singing hymns

Diana and I were utterly engrossed and gripped by the BBC *Line of Duty* police drama a few weeks back. How can we possibly have missed the three preceding series? If anyone possesses copies we would appreciate a loan.

Our television viewing is almost all pre-recorded. It enables us to watch serials in large, satisfying gulps rather than week-by-nail-biting-week snippets. It also means that we can fast-forward loathsome advertisements should we foolishly be watching a commercial channel.

We have been in England for almost four years now. This means that we are becoming familiar with some of the best British actors. It is distracting to encounter in a new drama a character whose acquaintance we have already made as someone else in another. We briefly lose the plot as we attempt to identify who he or she used to be.

It is like singing unfamiliar words to a well known hymn tune. Full enjoyment of the tune is diminished by a compulsion to identify the words to which the tune really belongs.

Is to understand to unbelieve?

I like to joke that one reason for declining church attendance is that when the Roman Catholics dropped Latin and we seventeenth century English, people understood for the first time what it is that they were professing to believe. They realised they didn't and couldn't. Perhaps modernising the language of church services was a mistake!

Translating poetry into prose kills it. Furthermore, as T S Eliot said, *poetry can communicate before it is understood*. Can liturgy be liturgy unless it is poetry? Certainly a poetic ear is needed to appreciate the divine in daily life.

How fortunate we are to have the mellifluous **Book of Common Prayer's** Holy Communion on Sunday mornings in St Nicholas' Chapel, and a monthly Book of Common Prayer Matins and Evensong at St John's. In a poem about a parishioner's Prayer Book funeral R S Thomas refers to

*The simple splendour of the wreath
Of words the church lays on him.*

Mark Twain's Epitaph for his Wife:

I love this epitaph. It must be the repetition as much as anything else that makes it so quietly moving:

*Warm summer sun, shine kindly here;
Warm southern winds, blow softly here;
Green sod above, lie light, lie light;
Good night, dear heart, good night, good night*

Queen Anne's Lace

Queen Anne's Lace is the loveliest of names given to wild carrot. Others are 'birds nest' and 'bishop's lace'. Warborne Lane is at present profuse in lacy loveliness.

The carrots we eat are a sub species of Queen Anne's Lace, the roots of which, when young, are just as edible as carrots. The flowers too are sometimes battered and fried.

The plant's similarity to 'poison hemlock' means that caution is needed in picking it to eat however, and its leaves can cause dermatitis. For centuries the plant was used for contraception and as an inducer of miscarriages.

When its flowers give way to seeds it is replaced by hogweed. To replace one white flower with another, P J Kavanagh once suggested to a friend, was unimaginative of the Creator. "Not at all," his friend responded. "Infinitely subtle. Different architecture".

Bribing one's way into heaven

Unaware that the pearly gates are as narrow as the eye of a needle, a wealthy man turned up there carrying a bag of gold bars. If all else failed he intended bribing his way into heaven. As St Peter was taking down his particulars, a passing angel peeped into his bag. The man proudly opened it wider to reveal more fully the extent of its contents. "Oh" sniffed the angel, "Paving stones".

(191) "This and That" - 7 May 2017

Never, for me, have AGMs been quite so hassle-free and peaceful as in Boldre. It has nothing to do with the godly and peaceful temperament of our congregation. It is because as a 'House for Duty' priest I am not required to chair them. I merely attend.

Second childhood

My priestly status is nowadays a sort of carefree second childhood. The AGM's of Harare Cathedral, where I began my priestly life, were likewise not my responsibility. The Dean there, like Neil here, bore all that worry and fret.

Neil chairs the meeting with more grace, good humour and clarity than did my Dean. Because we no longer run a deficit and have been gently growing in numbers there is little cause for argument, tension or disquiet. We have the same Councillors as last year and although Robert Jackson has stepped down as Churchwarden he remains part of a team of competent deputies for this year. Ruth Liley should be free to take on the honour next year.

I did produce an Annual Report. The main part of it had to do with 'House for Duty' priesting. It went something like this:

One of the few places where Church of England congregations are growing is in the Cathedrals. There are all sorts of reasons for this. One, surely, being that many believers are tentative or reticent in faith. They wish to acknowledge God in dignified and beautiful worship, but have no desire to be harassed, chivvied and prodded into deeper and deeper fervour, piety or faith. Cathedrals, in which a degree of anonymity is relatively easy to preserve, are more likely to provide this than are smaller churches with fervent and ambitious young priests.

No change-mongers

House for duty clergy tend to be recently retired and so devoid of ambition, settled in faith, experienced and accepting of the tradition and status quo. Having no need to make a mark they are unlikely to be change-mongers, harassers, chivviers or prodders. Taking no salary they are also less costly than full-timers. Though more to their diocese than congregation.

Perhaps then our 'House for Duty' priest status can be seen more as an asset than a liability. Just such priests could well be best suited to a parish like ours. Possibly the majority of us are content to be a part of a church developing a modest reputation for dignified, musical and reasonably traditional worship, lively preaching and warm community. New-fangledness and innovation are off the agenda. At least in part because of the settled and experienced faith and contentment of 'house for duty' priests like Frank Willet and myself, with our unusually involved and supportive spouses.

This does not prevent us regretting the paucity of young folk in our congregation. Especially as we go to such trouble to cater for them at every 10.30am service. We are grateful to those who do so lift our hearts by attending regularly.

Nothing wrong with high culture

The usual remedy proffered for the lack of the young is to go pop. To translate worship into the medium of popular culture and shed the tradition, vestments, dignity and reserve to which we are accustomed. Good arguments can be made for doing so. Some churches round about us are doing it both successfully and well.

But not even all children welcome it. Nor is there anything wrong with high culture. There are other ways to encourage the young as well as going pop. Ways that lend themselves to the architecture, tradition and ethos of St John's.

What I would like is for us to budget for the award of several generous choral or organ scholarships to local youngsters, preferably from William Gilpin School. We did this successfully in my last parish in Australia and gained not only a young girl whose voice developed into near brilliance, but her family too.

Waitrose or Sainsbury's

Some years ago I quoted Rory Sutherland in the Spectator, on the subject of status signalling. His father overheard a woman in Lidl's answering her mobile with the words, *I can't talk now, I'm in Waitrose*. Here is another supermarket witticism: *My hero is the bloke who founded Sainsbury's. It kept the riff raff out of Waitrose.*

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