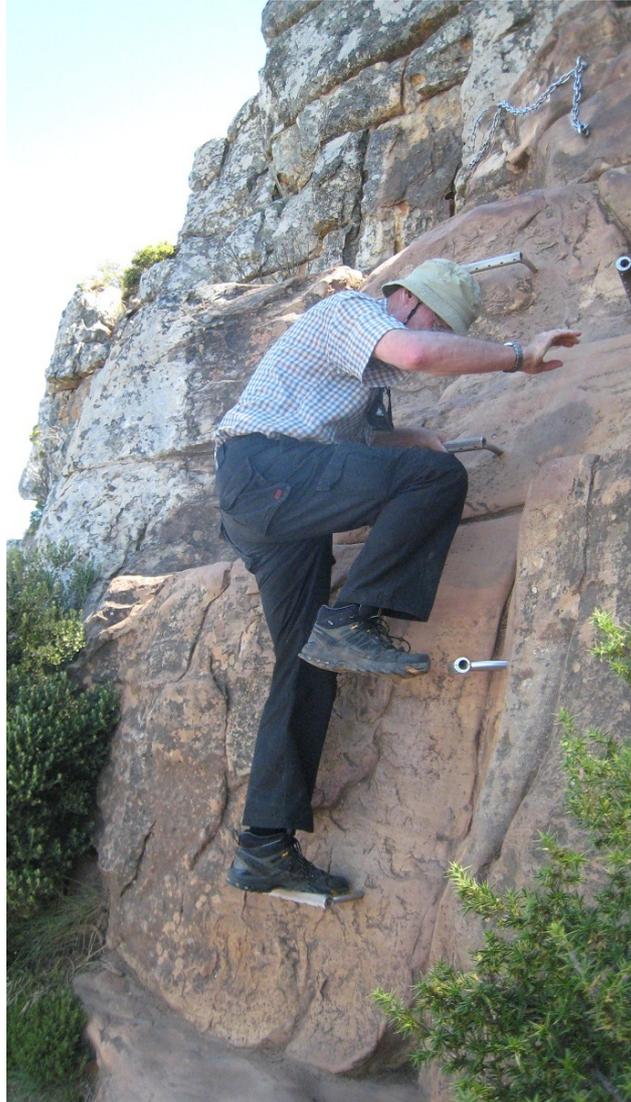


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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (January 2018)



NEGOTIATING LION'S HEAD

See (225) 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 **January 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>

(228) “This and That” - 28 January 2018

What do you say, in a ten minute talk, to a chapel full of prep school children, parents and teachers?

Boring, bumbling simpletons

Easy peasy. Vicars are so often caricatured as naive, other-worldly, boring, bumbling simpletons, why not boast the opposite? Why not unpick the whys and wherefores of becoming a vicar? Why not share my own joy and contentment in parish priesthood? Why not make a case for priesthood as the very best of all vocations?

I talked to the school straight after a post-funeral wake. There I tested what I was thinking of talking about, by asking Henry, an intelligent schoolboy handing round snacks, what he thought would be the very best thing about being a vicar. “It is unlikely,” he said, “that your job will ever be taken over by robots.” Indeed!

So why am I a vicar, I asked the school children? One suggested that it was because the job came with a house. Well yes and a pleasing one too I acknowledged. Another said that it might be because I was paid to be one. This enabled me to demur. Boldre is more than usually rewarding just because “house for duty” priests do not receive a salary.

A family business

We explored other reasons for me being a vicar. Such as my father and grandfather being one. The priesthood is almost a family business. As it was for little Samuel in the Temple, so it was for me. God’s house, God’s voice, God’s word, God’s family, God’s music, the vocabulary of prayer, the language of sacrificing love and all the fascinating candle-waxed bric a brac of worship were a part of my daily life as a child. I was enculturated to hear and recognise God’s voice in the music and poetry of what happened around me.

Even more importantly my father was an admirable parish priest. Bald, bearded, severe of demeanour, but with a twinkle to his eye, he was an interesting man from an interesting family. Full of stories and anecdotes that found their way into his sermons. No deskbound parson, he loved being out among workmen, helping on farms, dredging rivers, wood-working, plumbing, building churches and houses. Somewhere he’d learned how to butcher animals and he kept his own pig. I recall a pig’s head on the kitchen table about to be turned into brawn. He was an excellent cook.

Best of all though, he was adventurous. He took us to live on the loneliest island in the world for three and a half years and then for even more years in the African bush.

Vicarage life was stimulating and absorbing. Adolescent agnosticism and university-student arrogance didn’t stand a chance. Thanks to my mother’s influence I studied English literature which, like my life, is steeped in the faith.

Fathoming the unfathomable

In talking to the school children about becoming a vicar instead of, as now, writing about it, I was unscripted. Enabled to be far more informal, discursive, passionate and, I trust, more humorous than here. I did though want to get round to another important reason.

As a child I was allowed to question, argue and disagree. My parents were more theologically conservative than I have grown to be, but we could question my father’s sermons, tease him if a well known family anecdote was too extravagantly elaborated upon or fumbled and we could argue over a biblical interpretation or theological position.

He liked to make personal sense of the Gospel. So do I. All my life I have been attempting to fathom the unfathomable, iron out absurdity, reinterpret the unacceptable, render coherent the incoherent and make sense of what I will never fully understand, but love beyond telling. He also awoke in me a fascination for ultimate questions. Why? What’s it all about. Why am I, I? Why do we exist?

Too few children are encouraged to consider such questions. Nor are they shown how to abandon Sunday School versions of the faith for more sophisticated ones. The faith that so many of them are likely to abandon as they mature, I also abandoned years ago and yet remain a passionate Christian. So can we all.

Did I get all this over to the children. I doubt it, but at least they encountered a contented vicar.

(227) “This and That” - 21 December 2018

A hawfinch foraged and footled contentedly on the Vicarage forecourt for ten minutes last Tuesday. The first we can ever remember seeing. It is the thirty fifth species of bird we have identified in the Vicarage garden. Without trying too hard.

A beautiful bruiser of a bird

It is an exceedingly handsome bruiser of a bird, notable for a mighty, conical-shaped bill, the colour of pewter. Its Latin name *Coccothraustes* is derived from two Greek words, *kokkos*: seed, and *thrauo*: to break or shatter. Aptly. It's bill is powerful enough to crack cherry pips, the deadliest of tooth-chipping fruit stones. Its mighty jaw muscles exert a force equivalent to a load of 100lbs.

Damned statistics

Authors worry about the number of books they sell. Parsons about the number of folk in their pews. In the latter case inappropriately. The clergy are called to feed their sheep not count them. And yet statistics have dominated my days for the past few weeks.

We have been filling in diocesan attendance forms. It is a tricky business. Among other things we are asked how many folk comprise our ‘worshipping community’, but what exactly is that? Is it those who attend more than four times, ten times or twelve times a year?

All churches are required to record the number of those attending each service throughout the year. Attendance being one factor taken into account by the Diocese when it assesses “parish share”, which is the amount each parish is asked to contribute to diocesan funds.

This being so, parishes are inclined to modesty about Sunday attendances and the size of their worshipping community. Understandably. Tax minimisation is not confined to the likes of Google and Microsoft. It is all but universal. Up until recently it was considered an honourable as well as legitimate sport.

If parish statistical returns coyly understate attendance figures in the hope of minimising “parish share”, the statistics that indicate dramatic decline in the Church of England might be marginally brighter than they appear.

Jewish humour

I love Jewish humour. It's the only serious rival to that of the English. The Jews are even better than we are at laughing at themselves. In a review of *Jews and their Jokes* by Jeremy Dauber, Joseph Epstein concludes that although political correctness is having a deleterious effect on all humour, the Jewish variety is likely to survive. Though only if it remains based on the conviction “that out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing entirely straight can be made, that human nature in all its nuttiness does not change, and that the greatest fool of all... is he who thinks it can.”

Jokes about anti-Semites, he maintains, tend to be the richest. Like the one about the drunk at the bar who three times offers to buy drinks for the house, each time excluding from his generosity “my Israelite pal at the end of the bar.” When the Jew asks the drunk what he has against him, the drunk answers, “You sank the Titanic.” The Jew replies, “I didn't sink the Titanic, an iceberg sank the Titanic.” After belching daintily, the drunk responds: “Iceberg, Greenberg, Goldberg—you're all no damn good.”

Noses and domineering or extravagant wives

The film *Gentleman's Agreement* was released in 1947 and widely acclaimed. It is about a journalist who pretends to be a Jew in order to expose anti-Semitism in New York. Nominated for eight Oscars the film won three. For all its merit's the film's moral was wittily dismissed as "never be mean to a Jew because he might turn out to be a gentile."

Favourite topics for Jewish humour are: cosmetic surgery (Dorothy Parker said that Fanny Brice's rhinoplasty was a case of "cutting off her nose to spite her race"); the domineering wife ("when a boy returns home from school to announce that he is to play a Jewish husband in the school play, his mother sends him back to tell the teacher he wants a speaking part"); and the extravagant wife ("A thief stole my wife's purse with all her credit cards. I'm not going after him. He's spending less than she does...")

(226) "This and That" - 14 December 2018

We had 32.5 inches of rain at the Vicarage last year. Five inches above average (27.5). The average for London is a mere 23.6 inches, for Rome 32.8 and New York 49.9.

An emerald set in bronze

The driest place I have lived for any length of time is Shepparton in Australia, my last parish: 17.4 inches. The wettest was Tristan da Cunha: 66.2. In Jamestown, on the island of St Helena, Diana and her family made do on an average of 4.3 inches. Three miles away, higher up in the country, my family and I enjoyed 24. On that strange island you travelled from perimeter desert to central lushness in a mere couple of miles. Viewed from the air, by a passing angel, the island appears an emerald set in bronze.

On St Bernard's Mission Station in Rhodesia we enjoyed 35 inches of rain a year. It was often accompanied by spectacular lightning, thrilling thunder and the whisper of winged termites against window gauze. It was summer rain. Almost all of it fell in five months.

Having lived for years where rainfall is a longed for boon, I love rainy days and great deluges. The sweetest of all lullabies is a cloud burst on a corrugated iron roof.

A season of clear shining

It is England's greyness, the so often hidden sun, that gives it a reputation for always raining. It isn't. Except perhaps in the north west. Greyness and gentle rain are a boon. They deepen our pleasure in the sun when it does shine. The poet and hymnodist William Cowper, prone to the greyness of deep depression, used the contrast with sunshine to good effect in a beautifully positive hymn:

*Sometimes a light surprises
the Christian while he sings:
it is the Lord who rises
with healing in his wings;
when comforts are declining,
he grants the soul again
a season of clear shining
to cheer it after rain.*

The hymn is in our book and we have sung it once or twice since I have been at Boldre. It is set to a lovely tune by Michael Haydn, the melodious brother of the more famous Franz Joseph Haydn. Because few people know the tune, kindly organists tend to sing it to another and more familiar one. To my chagrin. As I write I am listening to a *Te Deum* by Michael Haydn. Exquisite.

The one who came with the rain

Diana's first child was born in Lesotho. A fine fellow. He came into the world just as the first and longed for rains of the rainy season broke. So he was christened Thomas Edwin

Motlalepula and is known to family and friends as ‘Pula. Motlalepula is Sesotho for “The one who came with the rain”.

Water restrictions

Cape Town is suffering from a serious drought. It has a classic Mediterranean climate: hot dry summers and cool wet winters. For the last few years the winter rains have failed and so water storage is at an all time low.

Restrictions were severe when we were there in November. They are worse now. Agricultural users have to reduce usage by 60%. Even borehole water for outdoor purposes is discouraged to preserve groundwater. Municipal water cannot be used for hosing down paved surfaces, irrigation or watering, to fill swimming pools and play pools, or to wash vehicles, caravans and boats. Citizens are each required to use no more than 87 litres of water a day.

While there my cherished morning shower became a challenging ordeal. I used a bucket for the water needed to shave. I then used that water to wash myself all over. A burst from the shower rinsed me. This too was collected, a mere half bucket in total, and used to flush lavatories.

Little wonder that my fullness of joy on returning from the Vicarage rain gauge each morning is commensurate with the fullness of the gauge.

A burst of astonishment

“At the back of our brains, so to speak, there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life is to dig for this sunrise of wonder”. So said wise G. K. Chesterton.

(225) “This and That” - 7 December 2018

On our way to the island of St Helena in 1982, my family and I were stranded in Cape Town for three months.

False teeth, fleas, rosaries and incense

Fortunately the worldwide Anglican church is a family. We threw ourselves upon its charity and were not disappointed. To begin with we were accommodated in the house of a recently deceased, extremely pious, high church lady who had bequeathed her home to Cape Town diocese.

Her false teeth grinned at us from a tumbler in the bedroom. In the middle of the night fleas emerged from fissures in her mattress, attempting to mingle her blood with ours. Rosaries were draped over the bedposts.

Her friendly and industrious maid happily diverted her care and love to us. She introduced us to her church in Salt River. There our two boys first experienced the odour of sanctity from a well stoked, smoking thurible, as well as whole-hearted congregational singing from a fervent, entirely coloured congregation, in those dire apartheid days.

Mussel shells and a fish fair

We were then accommodated for a month in a small holiday house, one of three attached to what is now my sister’s church, Holy Trinity, Kalk Bay.

Kalk Bay is a fishing village sandwiched between False Bay and high mountains. Its picturesque harbour is still home to a small fishing fleet and its narrow, precipitous streets are a pleasure to explore. They are mostly lined by fisherman’s cottages, many now fashionable residences. Southern right whales are easily spotted taking their rest close to land, in the right season.

Kalk Bay, in Dutch, is *Kalkbaai* and means *Lime Bay*. Early Dutch settlers burned vast deposits of mussel shells to make lime for building. The priest at Holy Trinity blesses the fishing fleet each year and his congregation holds a successful fish fair in which my sister Sue and husband Bob play a full part. The stone, thatched roofed church is close in sound and sight to the sea.

Nostalgia

On the last Sunday of our recent visit we attended the 8.00am Eucharist. I was all but overwhelmed by an aching nostalgia for 1982, imagining my little boys Peter and David and their mother, sitting where we were sitting, but with the exciting prospect of a voyage on a tiny tub of a ship all the way to St Helena. Churchgoing allows and encourages the luxury of remembrance, nostalgia, grief and joy.

On this 2017 visit the hymns were good, the liturgy pleasingly conservative and the sermon worth listening to. It was delivered by a retired parson, marginally older than me, who came originally from Zimbabwe. He trained at St Paul's Grahamstown, though a few years after I did. Boldre's links to Kalk Bay

The worldwide Anglican church is indeed a family. After the service I was introduced to David Anderson. His grandfather had been vicar of St John's Boldre in the nineteen twenties: Frederick Ingle Anderson.

Then Mike Peacock-Edwards introduced himself. We had met three months before in St John's Boldre where he was attending the wedding of a niece. Then Bishop Geoff Davies introduced himself. Diana and her husband Michael had shared a meal and friendship with him in the nineteen seventies when he was Rector of Kalk Bay. He had served many years in Botswana, supported by the same missionary society that looked after my Father on Tristan and in Rhodesia, myself in Rhodesia and on St Helena and Michael and Diana as teacher's in Lesotho and on St Helena.

Bearding the lion

The day before we left Cape Town we climbed Lion's Head. The summit is 2,195 feet above sea level. It broods sphynx like over Cape Town and is more than just a head. To imaginative eyes, adjacent Signal Hill provides the lion with a tail. Walking round and round the cone to achieve the summit offers 360 degree views of the whole city, Atlantic seaboard and Table Mountain. A glorious walk.

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