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### **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (February 2018)**



#### **THE FIRST DAFFODIL**

*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>*

## (232) “This and That” - 25 February 2018

The chamber music of Schubert is exquisite. It is also astonishing, in that for all the misery in his life, there is no bitterness in the music.

Which makes him more deserving of canonisation than many of the oddballs, misfits and cranks that have been so honoured down through the centuries.

### **Eloquent silence**

At St John's we are custodians of a particularly lovely church. Comments left in our visitors book are hugely complimentary and grateful for the church's daily open doors. They bring to mind a remark of A N Wilson:

*Many of us, on hearing the old bells peal out, feel that we would rather wait until the service is over before venturing inside. Unsure that we can assent to any of the words spoken from the lectern or the pulpit, we still return, hoping to find the place empty, and to hear what we need to hear, which, very often, is silence.*

Those words were written before his tentative return to the practice of our faith, but we need to respect those who feel like that. Time spent alone in an ancient and beautiful church can be richly rewarding. God is especially eloquent in silence. As R S Thomas notes:

### **In A Country Church**

*To one kneeling down no word came,  
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips  
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;  
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,  
Bats not angels, in the high roof.*

*Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,  
And saw love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
Golden with fruit of a man's body.*

Church visiting can be dangerous for the wicked though. When E M Forster broke his ankle in a church, Simon Raven remarked: *How unwise of you, my dear Morgan, to go where the devil cannot look after his own.*

### **Prophets of our time**

Thirty people have signed up for this year's Lent Course. To have such a variety of views, standpoints, prejudices and hobby horses in one sitting room leads to stimulating discussion. It also makes the Vicarage more interesting during the week. The place is now an obstacle course. My study is filled with bits and pieces of furniture cleared from the sitting room to make way for chairs. Entering it in the dark barks shins and elicits muttered, uncanonical oaths.

Each week we consider a different 20th century prophet. Last Monday it was Ivan Illich, a Croatia/Austrian, Catholic priest, philosopher and critic of Western institutions. Next week it is Alan Paton, author of *Cry the Beloved Country* and an anti-apartheid activist.

### **Indigestion and indignation**

A dean of Harare Cathedral, when I was his curate, decided an explanation was needed before the reading of biblical lessons in cathedral services. A bad idea. To be told of what we were about to hear, then to listen to it, and then to suffer a sermon all about it was unbearable. A triple dose. It aroused indigestion and indignation enough for the practice to be discontinued.

Would it were so with news programmes. We are told the contents of politicians speeches before they are given. Whereupon they are analysed and commented upon. Then the speech, once delivered, is reported and commented upon yet again. It arouses indigestion and indignation enough to prompt turning the radio off and listening to Schubert.

### **Evensong at Romsey Abbey**

Last Sunday we went to Evensong at Romsey Abbey. Lovely music, beautiful building, but unmemorable sermon. How fortunate we are to have Christchurch Priory, Romsey Abbey, and Salisbury, Winchester and Chichester cathedrals within reach for Evensong.

C S Lewis and his brother learned, to their delight, from an otherwise unremarkable Evensong sermon, that St Theresa, in a letter to a friend, said she never finished her prayers without saying to herself, *Well thank goodness that's over.*

### **(231) “This and That” - 18 February 2018**

There's a widespread, medium sized Australian cockatoo called a galah. It has a modest crest and ash grey back and wings. Its breast and underparts are a glowing, deep pink.

#### **Ash Wednesday birds**

To me galahs are Ash Wednesday birds. Their grey upperparts and glowing red underparts are like an early morning fire grate after last night's fire. Disturb the feathered surface ash, and warm, deep, red heat is revealed. The ash of penitence preserves the warmth of faith and love beneath.

The name “galah” in Australia is a mild insult. The birds are considered foolish, frequently leaving it too late to fly off the road at the approach of cars and trucks, and so often injured or killed. If friends or a child are being silly, acting the clown or fool they are termed a “galah”.

Yet the birds are lovely creatures. They have a loose-limbed, easy, lazy-seeming way of flying that marks them off from their more frantically flying cousins, the corellas, cockatoos proper and parrots.

The name rhymes with the surname of my 6 foot 5 inch son in law, Nathan McGrath. This enabled me at his wedding to my daughter Elizabeth (Lil) to include in my versified grace the following lines:

Thank God our effervescent Lil  
Has married not some dolt or dill,  
Some poxy prat, some grim galah  
But six feet five of fun McGrath.  
Bidding “Neaum” au revoir  
To be forever, Lil McGrath.

#### **Road rage**

The most dangerous petrol additive is high octane testosterone. It spontaneously combusts into road-rage.

Diana is a careful driver. If there's ice on the road she travels slowly. Early last Monday, on a very frosty morning, she potted slowly and carefully up Rope Hill. Behind her was a black car, with darkened windows, all but nudging the back of the car. Eventually it pulled out and roared past, cut sharply in front of her and then slowed down to a crawl. Ineffective revenge, amusing rather than annoying her.

Perhaps high octane testosterone was not to blame. John Betjeman could be a better diagnostician in his poem:

#### **Meditation on the A30**

A man on his own in a car  
Is revenging himself on his wife;  
He open the throttle and bubbles with dottle  
And puffs at his pitiful life

She's losing her looks very fast,  
She loses her temper all day;  
That lorry won't let me get past,  
This Mini is blocking my way.

“Why can't you step on it and shift her!  
I can't go on crawling like this!  
At breakfast she said that she wished I was dead-  
Thank heavens we don't have to kiss.

“I'd like a nice blonde on my knee  
And one who won't argue or nag.  
Who dares to come hooting at me?  
I only give way to a Jag.

“You're barmy or plastered, I'll pass you, you bastard  
I will overtake you. I will!”  
As he clenches his pipe, his moment is ripe  
And the corner's accepting its kill.

#### **Pancakes ancient and modern**

We had pancakes for both lunch and supper on Shrove Tuesday. Wafer thin, straight from the pan smothered with caster sugar and drenched in fresh lemon juice. The Romans sweetened theirs with honey, the Elizabethans with rosewater, spices, sherry and apples.

Pancakes go back much further than that though. All the way to prehistoric times. Made from a variety of ground grains they are reckoned to be the oldest, simplest and most universal of cereal foods. None the worse for that.

### **(230) “This and That” - 11 February 2018**

Why not buy a house in Lymington? Prices are not too daunting. A spacious home overlooking Cygnet Bay is only £370,000. Even better is a “boutique artisanal residence” with 50 acres of land at only £483,000. It has a splendid view of estuary and sea too. Tempting.

I talk of Lymington in Tasmania, 25 miles south of Hobart. My daughter and family passed through it in an eye's twinkle the other day and thought of us. In 1967 it was devastated by disastrous bushfires and is now hardly a village at all, more a district.

#### **Artisanal**

The word ‘artisan’ has become fashionable. The house referred to in Tasmania’s Lymington is marketed as a “boutique artisanal residence”.

The word purports to describe high quality, traditional products, skilfully handmade in ways that are small-scale rather than mass-produced. We are encouraged to buy, usually at inflated prices, artisanal cheeses, breads, olives, coffees and gins. Though the word has now been debased by the marketers of mass produced doughnuts and pizzas.

Whenever I see the word ‘artisan’ I recall Hillaire Belloc’s amusing quatrain:

*Lord Finchley tried to mend the electric light  
Himself. It struck him dead: And serve him right  
It is the business of the wealthy man  
To give employment to the artisan.*

#### **Something for nothing**

Those of us who, in our simple fashion, believe in a Creator find it impossible to accept that nothing can give rise to anything except nothing.

Many physicists, in their far from simple fashion, posit a “zero-energy” universe and define nothing as “an unstable quantum vacuum”. This does, however, contain fleeting electro magnetic waves and particles that pop in and out of existence. Just such a “nothing” can spontaneously generate something. But is it nothing?

Be that as it may, we are all of us united by a deep desire for something for nothing in daily life. A truth to which the popularity of lotteries attests.

Before the age of scans a New Yorker devised a scheme to make money from nothing. An advert in popular newspapers offered infallible predictions as to the sex of an unborn child from as early as one month after conception.

For a not inconsiderable fee and answers to a set of easy though random ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, a prediction could be obtained by post. In the event of the prediction being wrong a full refund of the fee was promised.

Once the fee and answered questions were received, the prediction of a male child in every case was made by return post. It meant that around fifty percent of the predictions were correct and the fee retained. The remaining fees were returned leaving a tidy profit to be banked.

### **Valentine’s Day**

Valentine’s Day is nearly upon us. I have no recollection of ever sending or receiving one. My father was different. He told us ruefully of sending the woman who was to become his wife and my mother a Valentine that was ill received. He had bought a sheep’s heart and pierced it with a lovingly fashioned and feathered homemade arrow. He presented this to his beloved in a box as they sat by the blazing winter’s hearth. In disgust she threw it onto the fire, wondering momentarily if such a man was worthy of her heart.

A delightful and mature lady of our parish told me last Sunday that when she was only nine or ten years old she sent a Valentine’s card to the Vicar of Boldre. It was to the well remembered John Hayter. He acknowledged it gracefully. A remarkable man. Loved and respected by high and low, rich and poor, old and young.

Excessive marketing, sentimentality and possibly old age too have disenchanted Valentine’s Day for me. Nonetheless I am pleased to discover that the first to link Valentine’s Day to romantic love was my hero Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Parlement of Foules*. There he refers to birds choosing their mates on this day. He’s right. The robins outside my study window appear amorous as I conclude this article.

## **(229) “This and That” - 4 February 2018**

The best of good friends give our ego a periodic kicking. It helps maintain the friendship.

### **A loquacious taxi driver**

After reading last week’s pew sheet my oldest and best friend sent me the following: *Didn't know your grandfather was also a priest. Explains a lot. Last bit reminds me of the true story of a loquacious taxi driver often used by the famous. He one day picked up Bertrand Russell: “I said to him, so Professor Russell, what's it all about then? And you know, he couldn't answer me.” He should have picked up a Neaum .... Funny. Sarky. Spot on.*

What reminded my friend of the Bertrand Russell story was my professed fascination with ultimate questions. *Why? What’s it all about? Why am I, I? Why do we exist?* Was I suggesting I am able to answer such questions? Even the likes of Bertrand Russell can’t. It asks for a put-down.

Yet that is just what I was suggesting. I have indeed found an answer to the riddle of existence. One that I am happy to share with taxi drivers, prime ministers, loblolly men and anyone who will listen, be they loquacious or taciturn. I give the answer an airing in most of my funeral homilies. Sadly it is too naive and commonplace for most folk to take seriously.

*Why do we exist? What's it all about?* The answer, symbolised by a cross: we exist to learn to love. To die to self and to love others. Insofar as we get anywhere near to doing so our lives are worth living and are filled with grace.

### **Abana and Pharpar**

This brings to mind Naaman the Syrian, commander of the armies of Ben Hadad. To be healed of his leprosy he was told by Elisha's servant to wash himself in the river Jordan seven times. Enraged he expostulated: *Are not Abana and Pharpar rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not be washed in them and be clean?* Second thoughts and good advice brought about a change of mind. He bathed seven times in the Jordan and was healed.

Too many of those who wrestle with ultimate questions echo Naaman and say: *Are not the lucubrations of Stephen Hawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Peter Singers better than all the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth?* May they too have second thoughts, good advice and change their minds.

### **Dayspring on Warborne Lane**

As we walked up Warborne Lane early on Tuesday morning last week, the eastern sky was crisscrossed and stacked with bright, brilliant, sunlit-gold vapour trails:

*The shifting rafters  
Of that new world  
We have sworn by*

In the 24 hours of the 21st of July last year Britain's air traffic controllers managed 8,800 planes. A record. If all of them produced a vapour trail, R. S. Thomas' lovely image of *shifting rafters* in his poem *Tramp* would place all of us in a capacious, glorious celestial barn.

### **Diminutive cats**

Signs of spring abound. Among the most pleasing are catkins. Winter's stark and skeletal hazel trees are now softened and hazed by a profusion of creamy, yellow-green dangling fingers.

Although the word 'hazel' is Germanic in origin, its use to describe the colour of a person's eyes is first found in Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet'. The word 'catkin' comes from the Dutch *katteken*: 'little kitten', its soft, furry appearance being not unlike a kitten's tail. Catkins are the only feline presence welcome in our bird-friendly vicarage garden.

### **Fin McCool**

The Celts believed hazelnuts to impart wisdom and inspiration. One of their ancient stories tells of nine hazel trees around a sacred pool. They dropped their fruit into the water which were eaten by salmon, fish sacred to Druids. The salmon acquired wisdom. A Druid teacher, seeking omniscience, caught one and asked a student to cook it, but not eat it. While he was cooking it a blister formed on the fish's skin and the student used his thumb to burst it, which he then sucked to cool, and so absorbed the fish's wisdom. The student was called Fin McCool. He went on to become the most famous and heroic of leaders in Gaelic mythology.

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