

Home

BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (April 2020)



St John's, Boldre

*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 **April 2020** 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>

(345) “This and That” - 26 April 2020

The first rain in over a month fell on the eighteenth. Three quarters of an inch. The Vicarage garden sighed its satisfaction, absorbed every molecule. Snow peas, broad beans, gem squash, shallots, spinach, garlic and French beans rejuvenated and invigorated, perked up.

It's back now to endless sunshine and a glorious spring. The vicarage oaks, even the tardy ones, have beaten the ash into full leaf. A dry summer then. Weather reports are the only news items that lift the spirits these days. Oases of sweetly sunny abnormal normality.

The ugliest of birds

After enduring “News-night” before bed and a news bulletin on waking, I began my daily journal 2 days ago thus

.....What a finger-pointing, fault-finding mob of misery-mongers! Who'd want to be a reporter? Who'd want to be involved in the media world at all? They obsess over disaster, feed on it. Like marabou storks, they're head and shoulders in ghastly gore, frenziedly, pecking, biting, pulling and guzzling.....

It was a relief to turn to Theodore Dalrymple in the Spectator. He reminded us that in Italy although sadly 7000 old people had died, 13,800,000 had not. So blow the press. I can turn my attention from them to my simile: marabou storks, repulsive old friends from my African youth.

They're the ugliest of birds and huge. Their heads and faces are bald except for a few wisps of fluff. They have too an unlovely, bare, scrotum-like *gular sac* hanging from their throat in which they store excess of their vile victuals. Although all but voiceless they are aspirant cathedral choristers, for they sport the suspicion of a white neck-ruff.

As with vultures a bald neck and head enables them to rummage deep into carcasses without clotting feathers with blood and gore. They feed omnivorously on carrion, faeces and any animal matter or species, alive or dead. Large numbers frequent garbage dumps, gulping down rubbish of all sorts, even old shoes. Although delighting in putrid substances, they are sometimes observed fastidiously washing items of food in water to remove soil.

Quintillions of grains of rice

My dependence upon the BBC is not total. The website of the Australian Broadcasting Company provides a pleasing alternative. On the home page click “News” for a more straightforward layout than the BBC, and usually an article or two written from a refreshingly different angle.

I was reminded there recently of the astonishing consequences of untrammelled exponential growth. How one grain of rice on the first of the 64 squares of a chess board, followed by two on the second, four on the third and so on, ends up with 9,223,372,036,854,775,808 grains on the 64th square. That the total of grains on every square amounts to 8.4 quintillion and that this is 923 times the entire estimated global production of rice for this financial year.

The Prime Minister of Australia is a Pentecostal Christian. Marabou stork journalists, usually derisive of Christianity, hypocritically cite Christian principles to judge him deficient in the practice of his faith.

For the Easter break he declared places of worship in Australia to be “workplaces” under social distancing regulations. This didn't mean that worshippers were allowed to go to church to worship. It meant that additional people involved in Easter rituals were allowed to take part in recording them – so long as they abided by the four-square-metre distancing rule. Good on him!

Benefit of the doubt

With our lives circumscribed by so many more rules and regulations it is particularly valuable to be familiar with the Gospels and thoroughly in sympathy with Jesus of Nazareth's emphasis on the spirit not the letter of the law.

There are pharisees about who rush to condemn a person's second walk or a car trip, no matter how necessary, charitable or harmless it might be. Far, far better to assume the best and to be generous with the benefit of the doubt.

Church bells preempted

After matins at St John's on Sunday our ringing of the bells was pre-empted by an even more joyous sound. Our first cuckoo. Reed warblers and meadow pipits beware.

(344) "This and That" - 19 April 2020

Easter morning and the first pint of beer after six weeks of total Lenten abstinence. Bliss oh bliss, oh bliss. Burp. Oops. Burp. Pardon.

Irresistible legs

Easter Monday and the first day in shorts. The exposure of peeled-willow-wand-white legs, rubbed nearly bald by winter leggings. They luxuriate in the tantalizing tickle of an early summer-promising, warm breeze. Legs irresistible more to ticks than discerning ladies these days.

Easter Tuesday and a winter hibernated lawn mower roars into life after ninety seven increasingly violent pulls of its starting cord. As satisfying a sound as the opening chord of a Beethoven symphony. The celandine-gold front lawn, now mown blandly green, remains inebriatingly cut-grass scented.

Daily longer and more leisurely lock-down induced early morning walks reveal St John's to be a mere twenty minute brisk walk from the Vicarage. Rodlease lane to get there, Church lane back. Clambering over the style into the lovely churchyard is a joyful foretaste of the hoped for passage through gates of pearl into another heaven.

Like Mary Magdalene

Among the innumerable and varied gifts showered upon your parish priest by God is an acute and peculiarly intense appreciation of and response to melody. A beautiful tune fills me with elation. I'm a melody mad melody freak.

On Easter morning I listened to Bach's *Easter Oratorio*. Originally a secular cantata, it was turned by Bach and his librettist into a religious work at short notice. Not wholly successfully say some scholars.

Be that as it may, on Easter morning the Oratorio's joyous opening sinfonia lifted me to the very courts of heaven. Then, a little later, a handful of fiddles and cellos with a couple of recorders, in a curiously muted, utterly compelling and divinely melodic fashion, announced a tenor aria that flooded me with Easter ecstasy. Like Mary Magdalene outside the tomb I met the risen Lord, refracted through tears of joy though, not sorrow.

The miracle of melody

I've just listened to an organ fanfare composed by Johann Philipp Kirnberger 1721-83. It's lovely. It would make a joyful entrance for a bride at her wedding. I revere Kirnberger not as a melodist or composer though, but as a musical theorist with a high view of melody:

The true goal of music—its proper enterprise—is melody. All the parts of harmony have as their ultimate purpose only beautiful melody. Therefore, the question of which is the more significant, melody or harmony, is futile. Beyond doubt, the means is subordinate to the end.

I agree. Melody is miracle. A mere linear sequence of tones, varied by rhythm speed, repetition, timbre, pitch, harmony and pattern, astonishingly cohere, belong and relate to each other so as to be perceived by a listener as an entity unique to itself. Just as I am so much more than the fortuitous conglomeration of atoms of which I'm composed, being gifted personality and soul, so too is a melody.

Mein Jesu, gute nacht!

Good Friday was as stress-free and Golgotha focussed as I can remember. I'd recorded my talk and service days before and so, for once, was free to worship rather than lead and direct worship. The day began clandestinely in St John's, behind closed doors - a simple Book of Common Prayer matins. Then I watched on one screen the three hours of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, while following the text on another. Never have I been quite so emotionally involved in the Passion of Jesus. The familiar melodies of the chorales broke my heart. So too, after Jesus's death, the choir's repeated, gentle interpolations into the recitatives: *Mein Jesu, gute Nacht!* (*My Jesus, good night!*)

Then on Easter Day itself the Paschal Candle was lit from a fire outside St Nicholas' chapel, with only Diana and myself present, but on behalf of us all. There followed the first Eucharist of Easter in the chapel, and then later, at 10.30am, matins was recited in St John's. Before and after which a vigorously defiant and jubilant ringing of the bells, peal upon peal. Christ is risen! Bollocks to the virus.

(343) "This and That" - 12 April 2020

Mary Magdalene, sits outside the tomb. Blinded by tears, she cries to the gardener: "They've taken away my Lord, and I know not where they've laid him." Tears are prisms, refract white light into rainbows, gardeners into her risen Lord. It is not the gardener, it's him, it's him.

It's Him, it's Him

Peter and John pound their way to the tomb. John, younger and faster arrives first. He looks in, it's mysteriously empty. He steps back, scratches an intelligent forehead, ponders, the penny drops. Of course! He's risen, he's risen.

Two desolate, dawdling disciples, on the road to Emmaus, are accosted by a spell-binding, articulate, knowledgeable stranger. What eloquence! He moves their hearts. Then at supper, he says grace. The penny drops. Though no longer there, it it doesn't matter. It's him, it's him.

A fruitless night of fishing for a handful of disciples. Then, on the shouted advice of a strolling beachcomber, a last cast of the net yields an enormous catch. The result? An alfresco, charcoal-grilled breakfast with Jesus the beachcomber. Unrecognisably recognisable, it's him, it's him!

Over the great watershed

These lovely narratives look over to the other side of the great watershed death. They're odd, strange, different, numinous. As you would expect from accounts of an event from as much beyond the world of time and space as of it.

The wall that is death has turned into a window. We and the disciples look out to a view utterly beyond our ken. Compelling, spell-binding, beautiful, intriguing, mysterious and unutterably other. As you would expect.

Up until Jesus' death we are dealing with historical happenings, with human accounts of experiences and events in real time. Garbled perhaps, biassed certainly, fragmentary indeed, exaggerated sometimes, but very much within our ken, partly just because of all that.

The Resurrection encounters are different. They were experienced in historical time certainly, for they turned ordinary people's lives upside down. But they're also different. Intrusions from outside, glimpses through that window in the wall of death into the beyond we call God and heaven.

Jesus hasn't merely revived or been resuscitated. Instead it's the God who holds all that exists in being who's raised him. It's an other-worldly event. One that time, space and place can't fully hold, fathom or contain. God's "YES" to Jesus of Nazareth's loving, way of life: to forgiveness, compassion and sacrificing love as life's very *raison d'être*.

How can we believe it?

How do sceptical folk like us experience it all as true? We sign up! Step on board. We're unlikely ever to be argued into faith, for faith requires a step beyond where evidence, and therefore proof, can take us. Instead we assimilate faith's truth in the risk of living it. Join the community that does believe it and attempts, albeit imperfectly, to live it.

Is it worth it? Yes. I would live my life in no other way. I've loved and love being a part of the Christian story, the Christian community. I love its fallible but extraordinary bible. I love its enigmatic, radical, subversive Jesus of Nazareth. I love the God of Gods who says 'Yes, Yes, Yes' to that radical Jesus of Nazareth's way of love, by raising him from the grave. And in so compelling, spell-binding, beautiful, tantalising, intriguing and mysterious a fashion.

And I love the Church, especially the Church of England that has baptized me, nurtured me, formed me and given me a vocation of vocations. Turning a natural sceptic and pessimist not only into a believer, but into something of an optimist too. Convinced that if a God of love of the Christian sort exists, and has acted in the world to say 'Yes' to Jesus' loving way of the Cross.... then there's no need ever to despair. For although it might seem sometimes that all we hold dear is being trampled on, all that is good, decent and beautiful in this sad vale of tears is doomed. It is not so. Not so.

The God of love who once said "Yes" to the way of love that is the Cross, in a resurrection, will do so again, ultimately. Trust him. Love, truth and goodness will out! will out! will out! Farewell despair. Christ is risen. Alleluia.

(342) "This and That" - 5 April 2020

From the moment I entered my study, last Sunday, shaved, showered, news-briefed and topped up with coffee, it was different. There was no sermon to tinker with.

Till China and Africa meet

I was at a loss. *A poem is never finished, but only abandoned*, so too a sermon. Obsessed with being understood and saying exactly what I mean, ensures that I tinker with Sunday's sermon to the very last moment.

Only when you have said exactly what you mean, do you discover exactly what you mean. It's enlightening. It's revelation. It's one of the great delights of writing verse, or a sermon. It's magic. I love it.

It was W.H. Auden who introduced to the English speaking world Paul Valéry's aphorism: *a poem is never finished, but only abandoned*. I love Auden, though he's sometimes frustratingly obscure. My favourite poem, at present, is his early ballad: *As I walked out one Evening*. It's about human love in relation to the implacable inexorability of Time. I have learned all 15 verses by heart. Who couldn't but love this:

*I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon swim in the street....*

Or this: *In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.....*

Or this: *O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.....*

Toe jam and metro pollution

I love the man as well as the poet. He was gay, a genius, eccentric, witty and profound. He was also sometimes scatological, like Mozart, and as a poet as natural and gifted as was Mozart a composer. A heavy smoker and extremely pallid of complexion his face became so wrinkled in the last two decades of his life that it was likened to a wedding cake left in the rain. A wit maintained that to meet him necessitated smoothing his face out to discover who he was. Best of all he converted to thoughtful Anglicanism.

He lived an ordered and disciplined work life, but in amazing squalor. Here is an account of his flat in Brooklyn:

The coffee table bore its household harvest of books, periodicals, half-emptied coffee cups scummed over with cream, a dash of cigarette ashes for good measure, and a heel of French bread (too tough for Wystan's new dentures?). An oval platter served as ashtray, heaped with a homey Vesuvius of cigarette butts, ashes, bits of cellophane from discarded packs, a few martini-soaked olive pits, and a final cigarette stub issuing a frail plume of smoke from the top of the heap, signature of a dying volcano. This Auden-scape reeked of stale coffee grounds, tarry nicotine, and toe jam mixed with metro pollution and cat dirt, Wystanified tenement tang.

A wannabe David Attenborough

Timothy Rice and I kept a commendable barge pole apart when we put together last Sunday's short, recorded service. He at home, me sitting in the Vicarage study, my laptop atop a stack of files to get it to the right height, I recorded the short homily in three nuggets. Each small enough to be sent by email to Timothy to splice together. It took me a long time. Each nugget went: film, goof; refilm, goof; refilm, goof; refilm, goof; refilm, that'll do. A wannabe David Attenborough minus gravitas. The end result, thanks to Timothy, exceeded expectations.

Holy Week

Diana and I have been celebrating the Eucharist behind closed doors at the usual times. To add excitement we imagine this to be as clandestine as for the Jesuits in Elizabethan England, though mercifully not as dangerous, except perhaps in Derbyshire. This week is Holy Week. The Eucharist will be celebrated each day on everyone's behalf. The Watch of the Passion on Maundy Thursday night will be kept too. So light a candle and join us in spirit for an hour between 7.00pm and midnight this Thursday night.

[Home](#)