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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

July to December 2024



The Lady Chapel, Wells Cathedral

The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired, with much gratitude and many regrets as the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice, on the edge of the New Forest, at the end of January 2023. His new home, with Diana his wife, is in the heart of Wells, in Somerset, a mere 5 minute walk from the Cathedral.

The articles that follow are the continuation of his weekly pew-sheet ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations now written in the study, situated on the landing behind the stairwell’s balustrade of his new house in Wells.

<http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>

(581) “This and That” - 29 December 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



St John the Baptist's Church, Boldre

One of the most perceptive Australian readers of this weekly column, dropped me an email last week: “*Just a note to wish you and Diana a very happy Christmas and do keep the balderdash flowing freely. Cheers, John*”

‘A dash of Boldre’

He is the best of fellows. I responded: “*I'm sorry that your comment didn't come when I was still Vicar of Boldre, a better title for the weekly effusions of those days might well have been 'Boldredash', or 'A Dash of Boldre'! May you too have a lovely Christmas. I was in the Cathedral for the last of three 'Carols by Candlelight' concerts last night (not services), packed with punters, in a*

nave lit by 3,500 candles, electricity entirely redundant, very lovely. Diana and I were ushers rather than paying concert goers, good fun..... Now, as I write, I listen to Bach's 'Christmas Oratorio', the best of all evangelists to the likes of me. Anon, anon, Andrew.

Slumming it with the plebs

Diana is a signed up steward or usher for Cathedral functions, I am not. However, because there was a shortage of stewards for the third of the three ‘Carols by Candlelight’ concerts, I offered my services and enjoyed the task. Being a novice I was given the fairly easy chore of standing at the entrance to the cloisters to welcome the hundreds of folk attending, to keep them moving and point them in the right direction.

I was in a dog collar, because I deem it to be good publicity for a cleric to be seen taking Jesus of Nazareth seriously enough to slum it with the plebs, instead of poncing around in glittering vestments. To my left, as I faced the trickle entering the cloisters, soon to become a flood, was a table offering mulled wine, beer, cocktails, spirits, sausage rolls, mince pies and packets of crisps, all at a price.

Beyond this tempting array, in the far southeast corner of the cloisters are the toilets, much in demand on a very cold and windy night. I greeted one and all with a wry, parsonic smile and a little jingle: “*To the right, the concert. To the left the booze and loos.* Good cheer abounded and we all got on exceedingly well, though with limits. No one offered to buy me a heart cockle-warming, mulled wine.

Epiphanic

Once the concert began, we were able to sit right at the very back of the Cathedral and enjoy a performance full of wonder and beauty. What I particularly love at carol concerts and services are well loved carols that are ingeniously and imaginatively arranged, their melody tinkered with, descanted, turned upside down and intriguingly harmonized, though always recognizably present, as is God in a Christian's life, reassuringly returned to fully at the end. This was beautifully done with several carols, best of all with *In the bleak mid winter*, a carol that every Christmas pricks my eyes and warms my heart and which, on this occasion, was truly epiphanic:

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a Shepherd I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man I would do my part
Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart.*

The concert's first reading, a familiar Betjeman poem, was delivered by the Lord-Lieutenant of Somerset, Mohammed Saddiq. At the end of the concert, the Dean escorted him to the back of the



3,500 candles at the Wells Cathedral Carol Concert

Cathedral and the two of them stood in front of the closed West Door, next to me, as the departing crowd surged past. I was on Mr Saddiq's left, the Dean on his right. The good "Lord-Lieutenant" made polite conversation with the venerable, imposing, dog-collared, servant of God, steward and stranger on his left and many of those passing by offered us words of gratitude.

It was as if I was once more at the door of St John's Boldre, fielding compliments on a fine sermon with mock modesty. Then I came to my senses. Who was I, a mere well past his use-by date steward, usurping a fine Dean by fielding accolades and compliments with aplomb? I scuttled off to stack chairs, collect programs and tidy up.

The beauties of dung

The choir at the 10.30 Eucharist for Advent Four was the *Cathedral Chamber Choir*. This is a superb, adult choir that is entirely distinct from the Cathedral Choir proper. They treated us to perfect renditions of a Palestrina mass setting and a very lovely Rachmaninoff anthem. They sing during Cathedral Choir holidays and other absences, as well as at weddings, funerals and memorial services and also visit outlying parishes to sing Evensong.

After the service, over coffee, a retired priest told me of a vicar he once worked with who, for his Christmas Day service, liked to base his sermon upon one of the characters commonly displayed in crib scenes: Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, a wise man, a donkey, a sheep and so on. On one Christmas Day he decided to push the boundaries and select not a crib character, but an undoubted crib presence, dung. He dwelt upon its necessity, its universality, its smell, its usefulness and so on. It took me back to my first parish in Australia where, to balance the books, we laboured under local shearing sheds, digging and bagging sheep dung to sell to gardeners in Melbourne. I celebrated this in a verse, the last two stanzas of which speak of the priest as follows:

*Under a shed he got down to his praying,
In sweat and in effort, in action not saying;
And so there were filled lots of offertory sacks,
Piles and piles, a great mountain of stacks.*

*This wasn't achieved by the Rector alone,
He didn't perspire and beseech on his own.
Parishioners too came to kneel in the dung,
To pray with their muscle, not with their tongue.*

I write this on Christmas Eve. I am to take a service in *St James in the Farmyard*, Milton Clevedon, on Christmas Day. I should try the same subject matter, but won't.

Only 00.35433 inches to go

Before the year's end I am hoping for 00.35433 inches of rain to bring the year's total, as recorded by my gauge, to 50 inches, an astonishing amount.

(580) “This and That” - 22 December 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Wells Cathedral at dawn

When playing Scrabble, a hand with too many vowels depresses the spirits and the score of even the most expert of the game’s devotees. To off-load a surfeit of them a useful word is *uakari*, the common name of four species of monkey from the Amazon basin.

Rubicund complexions

The most widely known of the four species are the *bald uakaris*. They have an unusually short tail of between six and seven inches and although their bodies are hairy, their heads are bald. A lack of subcutaneous fat causes their bald faces and scalps to be far too skull-like for comfort and their prominently projecting, lower front teeth deter any bizarre impulse to share a kiss with them. Most

striking of all is their bright red face. In human beings, a red face indicates embarrassment, gaucheness and ineptitude and as such is unattractive to the opposite sex. It is not so with bald *uakaris*. Females appear to choose their mates for the bright ruddiness of their face, possibly because a deep redness appears to be a positive indication of health.

Here in Wells, red faced creatures frequently visit our city-centre garden. They are a family of goldfinches whose beauty is indisputable. The youngsters were reared somewhere near to us during the summer and are now daily visitors, with their parents. They are among the most beautiful of British birds and a few days ago I came across a tiny poem by Yvor Winters (1900-1968) with a single image in the second of its three short stanzas that justifies the poem as a poem and delights me beyond telling:

Song

<i>Where I walk out</i>	<i>the goldfinches</i>	<i>quiver like a</i>
<i>to meet you on the</i>	<i>leap up about my</i>	<i>heartbeat in the</i>
<i>cloth of burning</i>	<i>feet like angry</i>	<i>air and are</i>
<i>fields</i>	<i>dandelions</i>	<i>no more</i>

To date, in our small, high stone-walled, city garden, we have identified fourteen species of bird. The tawny owls, that we hear pretty well every night, would make it fifteen, but they call from beyond our walls. In the large and well wooded garden at Boldre, on the edge of the New Forest, we identified forty species of bird.

Ploegsteert Wood, Ypres

From goldfinches to ducks. Last Sunday, after a fine Advent celebration of the Eucharist in the Cathedral, Diana and I went home and made a “duckboard” to place on the sometimes slippery stone-paving between our back door and the three steps up to the garden proper. Why is it called a “duckboard”? It seems that during the 1914-18 War, the word was coined to describe the trench-gratings that were first used at *Ploegsteert Wood*, Ypres, in December 1914. They helped keep soldiers from sinking into the mud at the bottom of the trenches. When they were wet, soldiers walking on them were prone to slip off as easily as water from a duck’s back, hence the name.

There is a poignant poem by the soldier and poet Roland Aubrey Leighton (1895-1915). When walking through *Ploegsteert Wood* in late 1914, he came across the long dead body of a British soldier and arranged for its proper burial, hence the poem. It was written to and for his fiancée, Vera Britain, and he sent it in an envelope enclosing violets. His grave, in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Louvencourt, is often covered by violets in tribute to this poem:

Violets - April 1915

*Violets from Plug Street Wood,
Sweet, I send you oversea.
(It is strange they should be blue,
Blue, when his soaked blood was red;
For they grew around his head.
It is strange they should be blue.)*

*Violets from Plug Street Wood -
Think what they have meant to me!
Life and Hope and Love and You.*

*(And you did not see them grow
Where his mangled body lay,
Hiding horror from the day.
Sweetest it was better so.)*

*Violets from oversea,
To your dear, far, forgetting land;
These I send in memory,
Knowing You will understand.*

In December 1915 he was shot by a sniper, while inspecting the wire in bright moonlight, in front of a trench at *Hébuterne*, 180 miles south of Ypres, in France. Not long before he died he converted to Roman Catholicism and the inscription on his tomb reads: “*Goodnight, though life and all take flight, never good-bye.*”

It seems odd that he should translate the Dutch word “*ploeg*” as “*plug*”, because correctly translated it is “*plow*”. “*Plug*” for *ploeg*, like “*Wipers*” for “*Ypres*”, was anglicised army slang for a foreign name.

Flirtation and canoodling

It reminds me of my sixth form school days. For A levels, three of us who disdained science and maths in favour of the humanities, were bussed 12 miles from the bush school Guinea Fowl Boys High, to Chaplin, a Co-ed School in the town of Gwelo. There, for our free periods, we used the library as a study and for flirtation and canoodling. There was a red haired Chaplin lad who had been given the nickname “*Plug*,” which he greatly disliked. To this day, whenever I come across the word, I recall his frequent, plaintive appeal: “Don’t call me ‘*Plug*’, call me *Graham*”.

Notoriously skinny

Back to ducks. Our duckboard is a fine piece of work made from wood that has been hanging around since we came here. My hand slipped while screwing in one of 46 screws, gaunching the tip of my little finger and so the duckboard bears a couple of sacrificial blood stains. At the Vicarage on St Helena, to ensure a supply of meat and eggs, we kept Muscovy ducks as well as turkeys, geese and Australorp chickens. Ducks are notoriously skinny. I recall being asked to dinner by the leading tenor of Harare Cathedral choir and discovering, to my dismay, that for the main course eight of us were to share a single duck. My plate was made up of vegetables augmented by a mere three square inches of crisply delicious duck skin and a near meatless wing bone. Muscovy ducks are different. Our St Helenian ones were deliciously meaty.

Our duckboard



(579) “This and That” - 15 December 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



An unusual view of Sherborne Abbey ceiling

In 1474 a fourteen year old Scottish boy, William Dunbar, was enrolled as a student at St Andrew's University. There he obtained a BA in 1477, an MA in 1479 and then, some years later, was ordained a priest. It is as a poet, not a priest, that he is famous.

Danse macabre

He was a *makyar*, that is, a poet closely associated with the Scottish court, in his case that of James IV, from whom he received a substantial pension. He was a versatile poet, producing satires, panegyrics, elegies, exalted devotional pieces, dream visions, scurrilous polemics and lampoons. He wrote in the Scottish vernacular, proving the language of the common man to be a vibrant and flexible medium for verse.

A favourite of mine is a sort of *danse macabre* entitled “*The Lament for the Makaris(Poets)*”. It mourns the death of 24 notable versifiers, one of them Geoffrey Chaucer. Each of the 24 stanzas ends with a Latin phrase from the Church's Office for the Dead, “*Timor mortis conturbat me*”, meaning “*fear of death disturbs me*”.

It is a saying that occurs frequently in medieval literature, which is hardly surprising, because death was so much more a part of everyday life then than now. The phrase was most commonly employed to stress the urgent need for repentance, reminding readers that death can strike suddenly, without warning and will have its way no matter how great or powerful a person might be. The first two of the poem's twenty four stanzas go:

I that in heil was and gladness,
Am troubled now with great sickness,
And feebled with infirmity :
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Our pleasance here is all vain glory,
This false world is but transitory,
The flesh is brukle, the Fiend is slye :
Timor mortis conturbat me.

(**Heil:** health. **Brukle:** brittle)

A melancholic conclusion

I myself have faced death several times and one of them was only last week. On Friday of the week before last, I was rung up by the dermatology department of Taunton Hospital and told that they would like to see me, on the following Monday, to discuss the result of two excisional melanoma biopsies. I immediately jumped to a melancholic conclusion: if the results had been negative, I would surely have been notified merely by phone or text. A face to face discussion could mean only one thing, *timor mortis conturbat me*. I began to compose my own obituary and funeral eulogy. *Timor mortis conturbat me*.

Diana and I turned up for the discussion in good time and were called into a consultation room by one of the kindest and loveliest of health professionals I can ever remember encountering. Her unenviable job must be to inform innumerable people of the bleakest and most unwelcome news that life has to offer, as well as, sometimes, the opposite. She was perfect. Kindly, attentive, matter of fact, clear and generous with her time, but without a trace of sentimentality or affected empathy. As it turned out, the news was good. The two excisions had got rid of two undoubted melanomas, but they were at an early stage, with no sign of them having spread to lymph nodes or other parts of the body: “Stage 1” and “Stage 1a”. However, as a precautionary measure, a wider excision is to be taken from the “Stage 1a” site, though only in a few months time. *Timor mortis non conturbat me*.

It was three or four years ago on a rainy day in Hobart, Tasmania, that I was reminded of medieval *timor mortis* poems. I had taken refuge in one of those sensible book shops that provide comfortable seating, to encourage visitors to dip into and sample books before buying them. I pulled out and began to read a book of essays by Clive James. One of them was about Philip Larkin and in particular his late, great poem *Aubade*. It is surely the twentieth century's most agonisingly honest, bleakest and most devastating poem expressing sheer funk and fear in the face of death. Here are but a few lines:

*Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.....*

In medieval poems it was the prospect of divine judgment that aroused fear and terror. In Larkin, who was an atheist, it is the prospect of annihilation,

*..... the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true....*

That such an intelligent atheist so eloquently and persuasively gives the lie to the bravado and braggadocio affected and pretended to by many of his fellow atheists in the face of death, comforts me. Is the fear of divine judgement from a loving and merciful God less admirable or more pitiable than the hopeless fear of cold annihilation? I think not.

Laughing at death

Be that as it may, it is good to laugh at death, if only to keep fear of it in perspective and at bay. Which is perhaps why, of all *Timor mortis* poems, my favourite is a parody composed by the crazed poet *Navarth* in Jack Vance's sci-fi novel *The Palace of Love*:

Tim R Mortiss

Drinking whisky by the peg,
Singing songs of drunken glee.
I thought to swallow half a keg
But Tim R. Mortiss degurgled me.

Chorus (as below)

Not precisely comme il faut,
To practice frank polygamy;
I might have practiced, even so.
But Tim R. Mortiss disturgled me

Chorus (as below)

To woo a dainty Eskimo
I vowed to swim the Bering Sea.
No sooner had I wet a toe:
When Tim R. Mortiss occurgled me.

Chorus (as below)

A threat arcane, a fearful bane
Within an old phylactery.
I turned the rubbish down a drain,
Now Tim R. Mortiss perturgles me.

Chorus (as below)

Chorus (with a snapping of fingers and clicking of heels in mid-air)

*Tim R. Mortiss, Tim R. Mortiss,
He's a loving friend.
He holds my hand while I'm asleep,
He guides me on my four-day creep,
He's with me to the end.*

*Great Wishford
Wylie Valley*



(578) “This and That” - 8 December 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

A hirsute, scholarly, elderly priest comes to the early morning liturgy at the Cathedral. During the pandemic he allowed his hair and beard to grow and rather liked the result, as do Diana and I. His faintly down at heel and raffish appearance is intriguingly attractive, once the twinkle in his eye is noted. It provides a pleasingly paradoxical cover or disguise for the bright, witty and gentle spirit that underlies it. Appearances are all the better for being deceptive.

Snooty disdain

On a recent visit to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where he is well known, he was treated with due deference and respect for the reputable research scholar that he most certainly is. Later though, in “the Great Wen”, he approached a respectable looking man to ask directions to the Marble Arch, only to be brushed off with unseemly, snooty disdain, suspected of being a mere down-and-out beggar on the look out for money. Appearances are all the worse for being deceptive.

A few months ago, on his ninetieth birthday, we held a little luncheon party for him and on most days of the week, after worship and before we head off to our respective homes, we pause for a chat and a laugh with him outside the cathedral. He admits to being pedantic and delights to challenge any grammatical or historical faux pas I make in conversation. He is something of a contrarian. When I express dislike for a piece of music at choral Evensong, he disagrees, as a matter of course, always with good reason, gently and without malice. Diana and I are very fond of him. His wife, who was suffering from dementia, died a few weeks ago and her funeral is to be held in the village of Priddy on the seventeenth of December. We hope to be there.

Last Tuesday he told us that on beginning to tidy up in his house he had come across what he took to be a “dementia awareness kit.” When Diana asked where it had come from he replied, without a thought, “I can’t remember,” whereupon we all three doubled up with laughter. The “kit” appears to herald a visit from the Social Services to subject him to a proactive test for persons deemed at high risk due to age. He tells us, mildly, that he faces the ordeal with “truculence”.

Dropping off the twig

I suppose Diana and I appear elderly to most of the people we meet these days, though not to each other. There is still a spring in our step, but contemporary friends and relatives are beginning “to drop off the twig”, a euphemism for dying that I love.

There has been much talk lately about “dying with dignity.” Surely there is no such thing. However death happens it is an undignified business. Relaxing bowels and bladder, gaping mouth and starting eyes occur, no matter how incense laden, feather-bedded, music-soothed and decorous a setting is provided for life’s great and last event of events. A degree of indignity is inevitable. To help mitigate this our life, down through the years, has surely offered us all enough indignity to diminish our pride sufficient to prevent a lack of dignity bothering us overmuch.

I would want to die indifferent to indignity, but with courage at best and resignation at worst.

The greatest horror to do with dying is excessive pain, best dealt with by a judicious application of the widely familiar and well-developed doctrine, “double effect”. This allows patients to be given drugs to relieve pain, even if the drugs are potentially lethal, so long as the doctor’s primary intention is not to kill the patient. I have had personal experience of the effective application of this doctrine while working alongside wonderful and compassionate hospice nurses in Australia.

Visiting the elderly

I am now my local diocese’s “Retired Clergy and Clergy Widows Officer” for the city of Wells. Diana and I are visiting all thirty-nine of them and it is a rewarding task, not least because most of them are a good deal older even than I am and it is reassuring to have colleagues out there so well ahead of us. The oldest we have visited is a hundred and one and he still takes a daily walk. All have been welcoming, interesting and talented folk. The calibre of those ordained sixty or seventy years ago was high. Two on our list were difficult to locate though, without notification they had decided to depart for heaven. The list was, but is no longer, a little out of date. All would affirm this quatrain by Alexander Shihwarg, who died in 2018 aged 95:

*My ranks of friends are getting serried;
Another one has just been buried.
I often wonder what I'm doing -*

Mourning their loss, or simply

queuing?

Christmas in Wells

We are at home this Christmas and I have agreed to take a Christmas Day service at *St James in the Farmyard*, where there could well be a real chance of the carols being accompanied in reality by:

*Oxen lowing, little knowing
Christ the Babe is Lord of all.....*

It is the parish church of a tiny hamlet called Milton Clevedon, between Evercreech and Bruton, home to between sixty and seventy residents. We will probably go to Midnight Mass at the Cathedral as well and so treat ourselves to the beauty of Anglicanism at its two, lovely extremes.

This will be our second Christmas untroubled by having to organise and preside over innumerable church services and activities. I have already filled out and submitted my tax return and written and dispatched our annual Christmas round robin. Diana has made three fine Christmas puddings, the mixture stirred and wished over by

“whatsapped” antipodean as well as local grandchildren. I have made twelve jars of mincemeat and both of us, in collaboration with a local grandchild, have made and over-coated with marzipan a great slab of a Christmas cake. It is odd to be so on top of things and yet have so little time to twiddle our fingers.

Making mincemeat without a mincer required a little ingenuity, but a small, hand operated food processor satisfactorily chewed up and mangled apples, oranges and lemons, skin and all, when well lubricated with brandy. I am half tempted to buy a couple more bottles of the spirit to blend the delicious mincemeat into a velvety, unutterably fruity Christmas liqueur. It would surely be second to none.



St James in the Farmyard

(577) “This and That” - 1 December 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Bishop Kennion quire stall - Wells

In 1845 a baby boy was born in Yorkshire, destined for the priesthood, for ministry in Australia and then in Wells, Somerset.

In 1945, a hundred years later, a baby boy was born in Staffordshire, destined for the priesthood, for ministry in Australia and finally in Wells, Somerset.

Parallels and divergencies

So far so parallel. Thereafter divergencies begin to appear. The Yorkshire boy was George Kennion. He was educated at Eton and gained his BA in 1867 at Oriel College, Oxford. The Staffordshire boy was Andrew Neaum. He was educated at lowly Guinea Fowl Boys High School and although he gained his BA exactly 100 years later than Kennion, in 1967, it was at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

In 1882 George Kennion was chosen by the Archbishop of Canterbury to become the bishop of Adelaide in Australia. In 1982, exactly 100 years later, Andrew was chosen by the Bishop of St Helena to be vicar of his cathedral on that island. Only three years afterwards was he chosen by the Bishop of Ballarat to go to Australia. Not as a bishop, but as a country rector.

The purchase of Glastonbury Abbey

For 12 years George Kennion was an admirable, pastorally minded and active bishop of Adelaide and then, for 24 years, of Bath and Wells. Among his notable achievements at Wells was to raise £30,000 to purchase the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey. He was a wise bishop. For example, during World War I, unlike some prelates he resisted a jingoistic damning of Germany and all things German and instead concentrated on recruiting clergy for military chaplaincies and encouraging women to volunteer as agricultural workers. In urging his clergy to support wounded soldiers he used the quatrain:

*God and soldiers men adore
In time of war, but not before:
When peace returns, and things are righted,
God is forgot, and soldiers slighted.*

“Let it not happen here”, he adds in the *Bath and Wells Diocesan Gazette*, though of course it did, until World War II loomed. The probable earliest version of the much quoted verse has nothing at all to do with the military, it refers to the medical profession, and is from the pen of a Welsh epigrammatist, John Owens (1560-1622)

*God and the doctor we alike adore
But only when in danger not before
The danger o’r, both are alike acquitted,
God is forgotten, and the doctor slighted.*

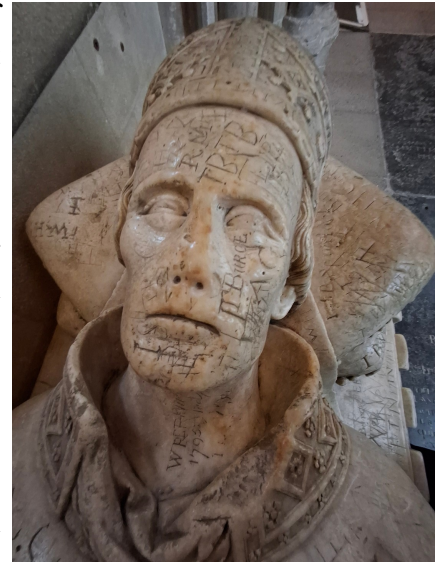
A kangaroo in the Cathedral

For health reasons Bishop Kennion resigned the Bath and Wells bishopric in 1919 and died in Scotland in 1922. At choral Evensong I sometimes sit in a stall that commemorates him. It is backed by a fine, early 20th century embroidered panel that depicts a kangaroo and the Southern Cross constellation. It’s a good place to be.

A month or so ago, when I was on duty as a ‘day chaplain’ in the Cathedral, I greeted a couple of visitors with my usual opening gambit: “Where are you from?” They replied “Australia” and so I enthusiastically identified myself as Australian. Their credentials put me in my place. They turned out to be David John Hurley, AC, CVO, DSC, FTSET and his wife. He had just retired as Australia’s Governor General and was in England to say farewell to King Charles, as well as to tour Cathedrals.

Luminescent alabaster

---- A much earlier notable Bishop of Bath and Wells was Ralph of Shrewsbury. In 1339 he took up the bishopric with unseemly alacrity, it seems, for he was fined 2000 florins for being consecrated before the Pope's assent had been granted. His tenure ended 34 years later with his death. There is a fine alabaster effigy of him, recumbent atop his tomb, in the Cathedral's north aisle alongside the quire. It is notable for being covered with scored and scratched graffiti, some of it dating from as far back as the 18th century. In medieval times alabaster was much favoured for effigies. It is soft and easy to carve and its creamy luminosity allows the hands and faces of the commemorated to be left unpainted, for being so lifelike. To the discerning, the luminescence of the stone suggests, as well as lifelikeness, a beyond-lifelikeness, an ethereal otherness. Predictably, it is the graffiti that most intrigues 21st century visitors. The mitre on the bishop's head is odd for being hinged on both sides and secured with pins.



Ralph of Shrewsbury effigy

Over-taxed citizenry

Ralph of Shrewsbury was what Sellars and Yeatman would call "a good bishop". Far more than most of his contemporary bishops, he was pastorally minded and rarely left his diocese, except for a few days at a time. When he died, he left most of his possessions to the poor. It was not all sweetness and light though. Twelve years after his consecration, a lengthy dispute over the authority of the Bishop versus the authority of the King (as delegated to the city's Burgesses) was finally resolved in the Bishop's favour. This proved costly to the City, for not only did the city fathers lose to the Bishop lucrative fees and commissions, they were also fined £3000 for allowing a dispute to arise in the first place. Taxes were raised and the bishop's popularity with the citizenry evaporated for a while. The moat and tall, crenellated stone walls that surround the Bishop's Palace, which so delight us today, were built by Ralph of Shrewsbury more to keep out irate and over-taxed citizenry than enemy armies.

The medieval street

Ralph of Shrewsbury's greatest gift to Wells and his Cathedral is the Vicars Close, the oldest and finest medieval street still being used for what is largely its original purpose. There is a commemorative panel-painting, dating from the late- sixteenth or early-seventeenth century, which depicts the vicars kneeling at the feet of the bishop with the following inscription, in Latin, attached:

'We are lodged in the streets of the town, but beseech you, dear father, that if you give us houses, we may be able to live together'.

The bishop responds:

'Your merits plead for you that what you ask should be granted; we have built permanent lodgings so that you can live as you ask'



Vicars Close, looking south

(576) “This and That” - 24 November 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Where the crows fly backwards

Who would best characterise an Australian? Caricatures, like poems, can bring us closer to the truth than any careful, prosy definition and so Barry Humphries' boozy, London based, Sheila crazy, Bazza Mackenzie pops to mind as an obvious answer. Be that as it may, the most Australian of Australians I was ever at all close to, was distinctive in more subtle and very different ways.

Disdaining pommies

He was a priest called Ellis Jones who died in 2020 and whose praises I sang in one of these articles a couple of years ago. He was a product of Sydney University at much the same time as Clive

James and the poet Les Murray and like them he possessed a fine intellect and was impressively literate. Unlike them he was more closely acquainted with obscurity and failure than with fame and success.

His wife left him to bring up a son and daughter on his own. He dearly loved and indulged them, in his own attractive, slightly shambolic, but ultimately effective manner, wild though they were. He drank rather too much whisky and being far too thin-skinned for a parish priest, was more than usually vulnerable to bruising from parishioners.

He preached with imagination, erudition and wit, without a script, and he delighted the discerning with, clever, quirky articles for the Ballarat diocesan monthly paper, when I was its editor. Years later, in the diocese of Wangaratta, I rescued him from an obscure country parish in the diocese of Bendigo by asking him to become my associate priest at Wodonga. He agreed to join me and was the cleverest, most experienced, quirkily wise and yet vulnerably sensitive of any colleague with whom I have shared a parish.

Though Australian to the core, he valued his Welsh heritage and when in his cups would quote, at length, from the Mabinogian. My “Englishman in exile” pose, he didn't much relish, mildly mocking it when in a good mood, but with irritation when not. Pommies in Australia are disdained in just such a fashion, mildly for the most part, but never on the sports field, where they are the enemy of enemies, to be beaten at any cost.

Gulargambone and Mooloogooloo

These recollections arose last week, when Diana and I had another interesting, erudite clergyman to lunch. In conversation I happened to bring up one of Ellis' many Australian expressions that I hold dear. He used to describe being a rector of outback parishes as residing “*where the crows fly backwards and the barmaids devour their young*”.

I've Googled the phrase and was mildly flattered when the first two hits directed me to my own website. The next hit referred to a book called ‘A Swag of Yarns’ by D. Mulhallen: “*The Speewah is a big place out near the Never-Never, way past the legendary Black Stump, past the town of Woop Woop and somewhere between Gulargambone and Mooloogooloo. It's way past the backblocks, in the land where the crows fly backwards (to keep the dust out of their eyes).*” About barmaids devouring their young the internet is strangely silent. Perhaps the phrase is Ellis' own invention.



Where the barmaids devour their young

On most Thursday evenings, Ellis and I spent an hour or two in a local pub. He was an excellent and witty conversationalist, regaling me with tales of life in Sydney and of the *Sydney Push*, as well as of the peculiarities of the diocese of Sydney. As a priest he was a product and admirer of one of the relatively few Anglo Catholic parishes in that benighted, conservative-evangelical diocese, which still refuses to ordain women and is the world centre for a brand of extreme conservatism that threatens to divide Anglicanism irrevocably. His spiritual home, Christchurch St Laurence, is different. I've worshipped there myself a couple of times and I loved its self assurance, liturgical panache and robust choral tradition.

Immediately south and east of the Harbour Bridge is a suburb called "The Rocks". In its early years it was a slum, much frequented by sailors and prostitutes. It is fashionable these days, the haunt of tourists, flâneurs, buskers and discriminating foodies. Determined people-power, however, has saved some of its older buildings and has enabled a proportion of less affluent residents and residencies to remain. During the late 19th and early 20th century, law-abiding folk stayed well away because the area was dominated by a gang of criminals known as "*The Rocks Push*". Their leader was Larry Foley, an accomplished bare knuckle fighter inside and outside the ring. He is the subject of a ballad called "*The Captain of the Push*" by the poet Henry Lawson (1867-1922). It begins:

*As the night was falling slowly down on city, town and bush,
From a slum in Jones' Alley sloped the Captain of the Push;
And he scowled towards the North, and he scowled towards the South,
As he hooked his little finger in the corners of his mouth.
Then his whistle, loud and shrill, woke the echoes of the 'Rocks,'
And a dozen ghouls came sloping round the corners of the blocks....*

There is an anonymous, rollicking and utterly obscene parody of this poem called *The Bastard from the Bush*. On a first reading it set me laughing as much as I did when first I read Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* as a school boy.

Logorrhoeac poseurs

From the late 1940s to the early 1970's, an intriguing, influential, libertarian movement, centred on *The Royal George* pub in the Rocks, assumed, adopted or was given the name "The Sydney Push", of which James Franklin writes:

...the Sydney Push was a drunken gang of logorrhoeac poseurs, that no-one could take seriously—in Barry Humphries' words, "a fraternity of middle-class desperates, journalists, drop-out academics, gamblers and poets manqués, and their doxies". Feminists of various schools have been keen to say what a lot of sexist bastards they were. Undoubtedly it is all close to the truth. But if the queue to bag them is so long, surely they must have had something going for them?they have some claim to a role in bringing about 'the Sixties'..... there were two Australian exports that had great international impact, at the libertarian end of the Sixties spectrum. One was Germaine Greer's 'The Female Eunuch'. The other was Richard Neville's London magazine, 'Oz'.

Of such and much more did Ellis Jones and I talk in Wodonga's Birallee Tavern as he drank whisky, I beer and we both smoked his cigarettes. On the 30th Anniversary of his priesting I began a fairly long verse in his honour as follows:

*Of all the many priests I've met
There's none I've come across as yet
Whose company's as stimulating,
As funny, wise and animating,
As that of Fr. Ellis, who's
A priest of priests, the one I'd choose,
Should I lie dying, first to come
To give me the viaticum.
Then, when I've died, to eulogise,*

*With words both humourous and wise,
My own contented, priestly life,
Less marked than his by woe and strife
Perhaps, but nor so colourful or steeped
In suffering overcome, that's reaped
So bountiful a sensitivity,
Kindness, breadth and empathy
To make him, rarest of all beasts,
A vulnerable priest of priests.....*

(575) “This and That” - 17 November 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Granite kopjes, Rhodesia

Cardington. There is a piece of verse, attributed to him, which so beautifully asks intriguing, but unanswered and unanswerable questions, it too fills my being with wistful joy and a poignant, pensive longing for the ineffable.

In 1784, shortly after the first public performance of Mozart’s *Quintet in E♭ major for Piano and Winds*, he wrote to his father: “I myself consider it to be the best thing I have written in my life.” He was twenty-eight and had only six more years to live. I have just listened to that Quintet. The beauty of its *larghetto* floods my being with wistful joy and a poignant, pensive longing for the ineffable.

Binding sunlight in her hair

In 1930, the massive British Airship R101, on its maiden overseas voyage, crashed and burnt out in France. Forty-eight of the fifty-four people on board were killed. One of them was Britain’s Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson of

Questions

How can she catch the sunlight
And bind it in her hair?
Where is the golden apple
Whose core is not despair?
How shall one cull the honey
And yet not rob the flower?
And how can man being happy
Still keep his happy hour?

Grim and cantankerous

In Byron Rogers’ fine biography of the fierce, misanthropic, curmudgeon of a priest and poet, R.S. Thomas, there is a photograph of the poet as a baby. Its irresistible caption: “*His first, and possibly most successful attempt at a smile.*”

Although grim, angry and cantankerous, what a feeder of my faith and validator of my Christian journey R S Thomas has been and remains:

The Journey

And if you go up that way,
You will meet with a man,
Leading a horse, whose eyes declare:
“There is no god.” Take no notice,
There will be other roads and other men
With the same creed, whose lips yet utter
friendlier greetings, men who have learned
to pack a little of the sun’s light
into their cold eyes, whose hands are waiting
for your hand. But do not linger.
A smile is payment; the road runs on
with many turnings towards the tall
tree to which the believer is nailed.

In 1972, at the end of the English school year, I flew out of England and a teaching career back to Rhodesia and then on to St Paul's Theological College in Grahamstown, South Africa. On the list of books to buy, sent by the College, was a substantial tome called "The Foolishness of God" by John Austin Baker.

"As any fule no"

In those days the best bookshop in Salisbury, Rhodesia, was *The Book Centre*, owned and operated by an amiable and knowledgeable couple, Victor and Eleanor Tarica. If I remember correctly they were atheist Jews and so, when I asked Eleanor to order "*The Foolishness of God*" for me, she waxed enthusiastic on hearing the title, assuming it to be anti-God. How wrong she was. The title asserts the exact opposite, '*as any fule kno*', to quote Nigel Molesworth. The book's title is the first part only of a famous phrase of St Paul: "*the foolishness of God is wiser than men....*"

That book, a challenging read, turned out to be the most significant I have ever read. It enabled me to believe, for the rest of my life, with my intellect as well as my heart. Though so seriously and respectfully does Baker take the excellent reasons for doubt and disbelief, I read it in fascinated trepidation, wondering all the while if he was going to leave me, at the end, with anything worth believing in at all. He did.

The greatest liberation, for me, was to be persuaded, on well argued exegetical grounds and without having to jettison belief in the Incarnation, that the historical Jesus of Nazareth, in so far as he can be seen and known at all, didn't and wouldn't have claimed himself to be God. So much falls into place once this is accepted.

The book's well argued overall thesis, is that the only credible God is one for whom sacrificial love is the supreme value and that we exist to learn to love sacrificially. No more satisfying answer to the riddle of human existence is on offer.

"the collapse of Judaistic Christianity under the pressures of history.... affords Christians the best chance they have ever had to regain the perspective of the original Gospel. Because people are ceasing to believe in a Providence of simple, retributive justice, or in a magician-god who will wave his wand to give them whatever they ask; because they are beginning to value freedom and the responsibility which has to learn by making mistakes; because they are more acutely aware than ever before of being one small single family of Man in a universe too vast for their imagination to take in; because of all these things, what Jesus said and how he lived has more meaning, more relevance, not less. The world has not left Jesus behind; it is getting to the point where it can just see him, far ahead, blazing the trail..." (John Austin Baker)

"Harrumph"



A tall poppy

In 1980, with our sons, one aged two and the other a few months, we visited England, on leave from Rhodesia. For some weeks we stayed in a cosy little house in Bury Walk, Chelsea. It was not well insulated from its neighbours and our youngest son spent a good portion of one night yelling his head off. After a while a window was flung open and an angry, public school accented voice shouted, "Won't someone shut that bloody child up!" Frazzled myself I shouted back: "What do you want me to do, stuff a sock in his mouth?" The response was a disgusted "harrumph".

On Sundays while there, I would abandon my family to make my selfish way to St Margaret's, Westminster to hear thoughtful, lucid sermons from a six foot and four inch tall, friendly John Austin Baker. A tall poppy in the C. of E.'s field of dwarves.

(574) “This and That” - 10 November 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Lady Chapel roof, Wells Cathedral

If it were possible to be vaccinated against the Bible, convinced atheists, even when committed anti-vaxxers, might well be interested, if only for their children.

Junkies

Diana and I were offered just such a vaccination a month or so ago. We were texted by the good old NHS (the next best thing to God in this remarkable land of ours) and offered inoculation against RSV. Being products of the 1940s and early 1950s, with a scar on our bodies from a successful inoculation against smallpox and never having suffered from tetanus, yellow fever, typhoid, polio or diphtheria, thanks to vaccinations, we are both vaccination junkies. We happily accepted the offer.

Blessed be he, she or it

The RSV, to my generation of bible lovers, bashers and interpreters, happens to be the *Revised Standard Version* of the bible, one of the best. To pass my Greek finals at Theological College, I learned the RSV version of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* off by heart and passed with ease, flummoxing my examiners with my fluency. The

RSV remains my favourite translation, but it is rarely heard in church these days. Modern theologians and biblical scholars appear to have been vaccinated against it.

In their text to me, the NHS (blessed be He, She or It) meant by RSV, it seems, not a version of the bible, but the *Respiratory Syncytial Virus*, nastier and far less intriguing than a close translation of the bible, but only marginally more dangerous.

Funking necessary guidance

In talking along these lines to my daughter recently, she remarked that there's no need for a vaccination against the bible because the Church itself does the job all too successfully. It inoculates our Young against the book by funking any guidance through the most necessary and yet fraught of transitions from a child's understanding of the biblical narrative to an adult's. Too many of our children and grandchildren grow to disdain the bible, because the Church has neglected to guide them from a childlike, purely literal understanding of fact and truth, as found in narrative and history, to an appreciation of truth as suggested, glimpsed and discerned by way of metaphor, simile, poetry, dream, fable, parable, story, legend and myth, as well by fact.

The bible, when understood and believed literally to be the “Word of God”, is worse than dangerous, it's appalling. *Numbers*, chapter 31:13-18 makes the point:

Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. Moses said to them, 'Have you allowed all the women to live? These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord ... so that the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.....'

The bible needs a thorough kicking as well as reverence, debunking as well as pedestalling, if it is to lead us, in adulthood, into the truth and beauty to which, in Jesus of Nazareth, it points, aspires, leads, bears witness and ultimately finds its way.

The Christian story is wondrous. It answers the riddle of human existence, offers the only satisfactory answer to the question “why do I exist”, is a pearl of unsurpassable price. The novelist, Francis Spufford, puts it well “... absolutes we cannot possibly comprehend gleam momentarily into sight on the moving surfaces of represented people and events. Gospel truth is story truth.” Truth it is, ultimate Truth.

Stinking of extinction

All of which brings to mind a poet and a poem I have quoted before. The poet is Stephen Dunn, an atheist, and his poem is called: *At The Smithville Methodist Church*. In thirteen stanzas it tells of the poet and his wife's discomfiture when their young daughter comes home from the first day of an Arts and Crafts Week at the Smithville Methodist Church with a “*Jesus Saves*” button. They manage to rationalise away their discomfiture because Jesus, they decide, was a good man, and “*putting faith in good men*” is necessary “*to stay this side of cynicism...*” They leave her to enjoy her week at the church without intervening, but when she comes home singing “*Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so,*” they decide it is “*time to talk*”. Again, though, on reflection, they funk it, because:

*Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief to a child,
only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story nearly as good.....*

*Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes. You can't say to your child
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks of extinction and nothing*

*exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car she sang the songs,*

*occasionally standing up for Jesus. There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along in silence.*

However, when she comes of age, unless the Church teaches and guides her to transition to a more subtle, nuanced, and comprehensive way of understanding the phrase, “*...the Bible tells me so,*” Stephen and his wife won’t need to help her turn to atheism, she will find her own way there with ease.

Tactical filter coffee

A fine fellow to whom I was introduced after the 10.30am Eucharist last Sunday, commented appreciatively on the quality of the coffee provided after the Cathedral service. I responded: “Yes indeed, it makes good tactical sense. Every Sunday, in the notices and announcements before the service begins, one of the clergy invariably and proudly makes mention of the availability of ‘filter coffee’ on offer when the show is over. It is a way of saying ‘the sermon might be too long, the intercessions tedious, the hymn tunes obscure and the final organ voluntary a dissonant horror, but the post Eucharistic coffee, that, that, that at least, is superb! We can all leave with a fine taste in our mouth.’”

**Wells Cathedral
at night**



(573) “This and That” - 3 November 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



*Aesop & fox
c.450 BC*

The life story of the fabulist Aesop is in itself more fable than fact. He is purported to have been a remarkably ugly slave “*of loathsome aspect, ... potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, swarthy, dwarfish, bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, liver-lipped—a portentous monstrosity.*” Once he had gained his freedom from slavery, some sources claim, he became a diplomat of King Croesus and a contender for inclusion as one of the *Seven Sages of Greece*. It is also claimed that the authorities of Delphi, whom he insulted, sentenced him to death, on a trumped up charge, and threw him off a cliff to his end. All of which is as much disputed as is his authorship of the famous Fables.

The fox and the goat

One of his fables has bequeathed us a proverb that reinforces the timidity, caution and risk-aversion that can so blight our lives today. In Aesop’s fable, *The Fox and the Goat*, a fox falls into a well and is unable to get out. As luck would have it, a thirsty goat passes by and the smooth talking fox manages to persuade him to leap into the well to get a drink. This he does, but without weighing up the pros and cons of so doing. Whereupon the fox clambers onto the goat’s back and out of the well, leaving the goat trapped in place of the fox. When the goat asks the fox for help, the fox refuses, saying that the goat has only himself to blame: “*Look before you leap!*”

Caution can be overdone. A recent article by the Revd Marcus Walker has the irresistible title:

‘Why are C of E Bishops So Bland’

It begins:

“Nolo episcopari”. These were the words a person was expected to say on being offered an episcopal see. It basically translates as “Don’t bishop me!” and goes back to at least St Ambrose, who so wanted to avoid being made a bishop that he skipped town..... “Nolo episcopari” goes beyond a mere phrase. It recognises that the worst person to become a bishop is someone who wants to be one. This was very much what the C of E thought until about 15 years ago, when the then head of HR for a subsidiary of British Gas – one Caroline Boddington – took over appointments and everything changed. Those most likely to be considered for the post are now encouraged to pursue a clear career path which will train them in everything except how to be a long-serving parish priest..... In the old days, nobody knew they were being considered – a situation not without its complexities. But having people thrust themselves forward means getting the people who want to thrust themselves forward, the glint of episcopal ambition shining in the eye.....”

The very first episcopal election

Interesting and inspiring qualities such as holiness, otherworldliness, erudition, wackiness, eccentricity, outspokenness, and any propensity to sail close to the wind, are being ironed out of the episcopate and indeed out of the clergy generally. The Church has become too risk-averse, too cautious and too dull.

At its very beginning, the Church risked selecting its first bishop, to replace Judas Iscariot, by a throw of the dice. Once elected, nothing more is heard of Matthias, but the risk of sheer chance had been taken and to hear nothing more about an apostle advised by the Crucified One, as are we all, to opt to be last rather than first, and to choose to sit at the bottom of the table not the top, is surely a fair indication of him having taken to heart the phrase: “*Nolo episcopari*”.

Meeting the eye of strangers

Risk-aversion can even dissuade us from meeting the eye of strangers in the street. Members of the opposite sex might interpret doing so as suggestive and react negatively. Yobbos might perceive it to be a challenge and respond aggressively. Far safer to avoid eye contact altogether then. It is great pity, because daily life offers few more lovely, minor little gifts and graces than being spontaneously smiled at by a stranger who happens to meet our eye, be it in the street, on a train or wherever. It lightens the heart and gladdens a day. The following poem, by *A.S.J. Tessimond*, (1902-62), catches the truth of this perfectly, especially in its last line:

Fish Do Not Smile

Fish do not smile
Nor birds
Their faces are not equipped for it.
A smiling dog's the illusion and wish fulfilment of its owner.
Cats wear permanent smiles inspired by mere politeness.
But human animals at times forget their godlike responsibilities;
The tension slackens
The weasel sharp intentness falters;
Muscles relax,
The eyes refrain from peering aside, before and after;
And the burden of detail drops from the forehead;
Cheekbone gently creases;
The mouth wide-flowers;
The stiff mask softens;
And man bestows his simple, unambitious,
 unservile, unselfseeking, undeceptive, uncorrupt gift;
The grace-note of a smile.



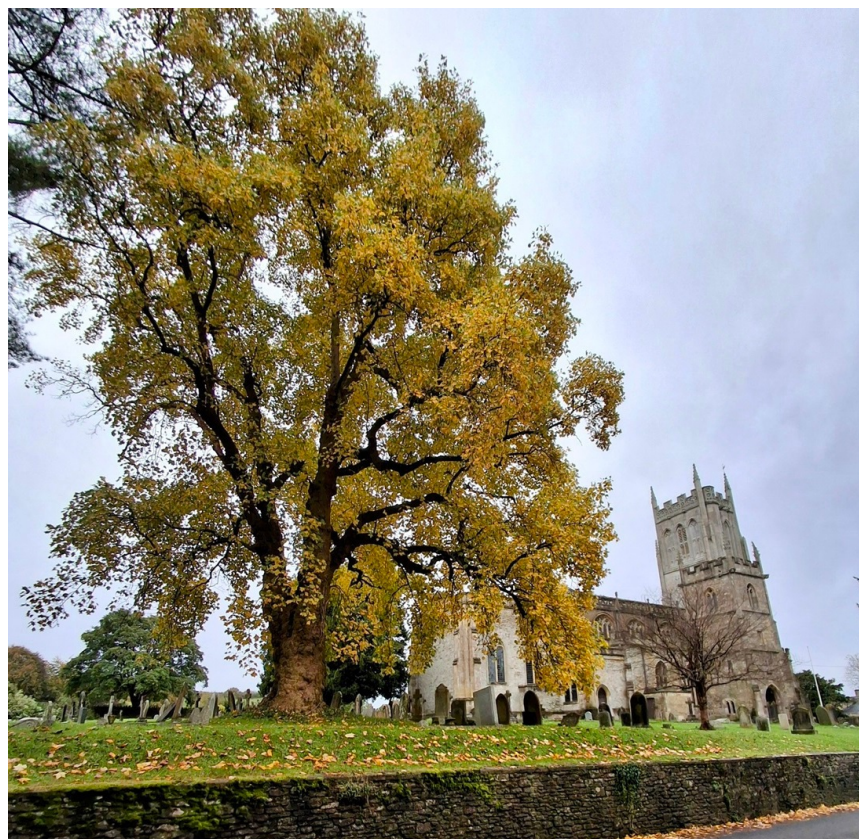
acciaccatura

A grace note is an ornamental, not strictly essential, small note printed in a music score to be added to a melody. In one form it is known as an *acciaccatura* which, while not affecting the timing, can brighten and lighten a melody. In another form, known as an *appoggiatura*, it just because it does steal time from the following note, can add a wistful, yearning quality.



appoggiatura

This is just what a smile can do to a receptive person's day. It can brighten and gladden it or, in some circumstances, can add a dreamy, wistful, yearning for things to be different and better. The last line of the poem is a perfect metaphor.



St Mary's Bruton
(two towers)

(572) “This and That” - 27 October 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Leaving Melbourne - approaching the Westgate Bridge

A bright red container ship, the *MV Bahia*, steamed out of Melbourne harbour at 2.30pm on Tuesday 11 June 2013. Six decks high and 86 steps up from the bottom deck, just below the bridge and dead centre between port and starboard, was a spacious, comfortable cabin, commanding a fine view over myriad containers to the ship's bow. It had just become a bolt hole and home to Diana and myself and remained so, until we docked in Philadelphia, on the east coast of the USA, thirty five days later.

As we passed under Melbourne's mighty *Westgate Bridge*, I felt a great stab

of sadness at leaving a land that for twenty eight years had seen me and my family through so much. A land of which I had fairly recently become a citizen. However, pressing ahead and moving on to new abodes, islands and continents is in my blood. Gleeful anticipation of what lay ahead soon healed the wound.

Gesticulating silhouettes

As we crossed a tranquil, pewter-grey Port Philip Bay, Diana phoned an admirable parishioner from my last Australian parish. She and her husband had moved to live on the Mornington Peninsula, on the east side of the Bay. In response to the call, the two of them drove to the coast to wave to us and to the ship as it passed close by and before it turned towards Point Lonsdale and the open sea. Shortly afterwards, my son Peter, a couple of hundred miles north of Melbourne, in the city of Albury, on the River Murray, phoned us to say that he had our ship in view on his computer screen, thanks to a camera at Point Lonsdale. He asked us to go on deck, as close to the funnel as possible, because he had hooked the camera's view of the ship to the computers of family members in Australia and England. As dusk fell we made our way to the highest deck, on the starboard side, and apparently were visible to them all as black, gesticulating silhouettes.

Our cabin comprised an *en suite* bedroom, with plenty of cupboard space and two three quarter size beds. There was also a sitting room, with an office area and a spacious desk upon which we would both be able to type up the 300,000 words of my mother's hand-written, Tristan da Cunha diaries from the 1950s. An added and appreciated amenity was a video player and screen with a ready supply of DVDs from a well stocked library not far from the cabin. We were the vessel's only passengers.

Out of touch and ignorant

These recollection are prompted by a decision, last Sunday afternoon, to clean up my office desk. Among discarded phones, tangled cables, ipods, plugs, disks and office bric a brac, I happened upon a flash drive that contained a large number of films. It proved to be one upon which the ship's Chief Engineer had downloaded films for us, from his own collection. Up until this voyage across the Pacific and then later, on a different ship across the Atlantic, I had been a reader of books, not a watcher of films. It was different on board ship, we watched a new film every night and in my emails from the ship to my children, I reported on those we'd seen, enthusiastically commending good ones and vehemently decrying bad ones. This amused them, because all the films had been around for years. I was merely parading how out of touch and ignorant I am.

Lurking nettles

So it was that last Sunday evening I plugged the newly discovered flash drive into our television screen and we watched *Forrest Gump*, for a second time. What a wonderful film it is. Moving but not mawkish, funny but not cruelly, excellently acted and imaginatively filmed. Even better, it is a highly moral film for celebrating innocence and an innocent, steadfastness and loyalty, wisdom in folly, and

beauty and goodness in naivete. It's a fine example of what St Paul was getting at in his phrase "the foolishness of God". We'd forgotten what a good and life affirming film it is.

The next day I decided to see if my daily journal could tell us when we had first watched the film and what we thought of it. I called up my journal, pressed "Control F" and printed the word 'Gump' into the search box. There was no trace whatsoever of Forrest and his film. Only the word "gumption" kept turning up. It must be a favourite of mine. The entry for Saturday 22 July 2006 reads as follows:

I awoke late, a little before half past six. A lovely evening at the home of the always so hospitable and generous John and Pat Griffin, to celebrate their Golden Wedding with Heather and Kevin and someone called Len and his wife, he being a wood-working teacher colleague of John's. Instead of John's more usual and superb Roast Beef, with a perfect Yorkshire pudding, served on its own with gravy, to start the main course, we had Roast Pork, for a change, with an exotic and delicious orange sauce. The cauliflower soup was spiced up with nogs of Stilton. All very good indeed. By request I had composed a sort of grace for the occasion:

*To be not squashed or sat upon
From fifty years espoused to John,
Asked of Pat inspired resilience,
And strategies approaching brilliance,
Humour, cheek, a strong right arm,
All balanced though by love and charm.*

*To be not squashed and splatted flat
From fifty years espoused to Pat,
Demanded John's best savoir faire,
Tact and gastronomic flair,
Attentive face, selective ear
And too, a heart that holds her dear.*

*They've loved each other with panache,
With, spirit, gumption, fire and dash,
Stony crags they've scrambled over
And now their bums are set in clover,
Though here and there still lurks a nettle
To try their love and test their mettle.*

*We thank you Lord that they're so able
To tell their love around their table,
In scrumptious food and heady wine,
With friends so often asked to dine.
Like their Lord in Palestine,
Who, too, made love of bread and wine.*



Leaving Tauranga, New Zealand on MV Bahia

(571) “This and That” - 20 October 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Wells Cathedral: view from the north transept

In the 19th century, sailors making merry ashore were sometimes tempted or “hocussed” into such a state of blind drunkenness it allowed them to be “skinned”, that is, to be stripped of both their clothes and their cash. In the early 20th century the word “skinned” morphed and generalised into the pleasing word, “skint”.

Cheese, gherkins and leprechauns

Although for long periods of a largely contented life I’ve lived on a modest income, only once have I been truly skint. This was in the early 1970s when I arrived in London from Rhodesia, with very little cash, after dallying for a while in Spain. Unlike the Prodigal Son, in Jesus’ famous parable, my impecunity was not from having “wasted my substance on riotous living,” nor was it from “devouring my living with harlots”. Rather, it was because I was confident of easily picking up reasonable remuneration as a “supply teacher” as soon as I arrived in Britain. Unfortunately, my plans for speedy employment were thwarted by an extended postal strike.

I found cheap digs in Chiswick, at £4.10 a week, which included two slices of toast and a pot of tea each morning. My landlady was a severe, frugal and devout Roman Catholic. She denied access to my room to any girlfriends and turned off the hot water system once winter showed signs of giving way to spring. She had a kind enough heart

to allow me credit on my rent though, for which I was duly grateful. I fed myself in my room on the cheapest of foodstuffs that required no cooking and allowed myself a weekly treat of egg and chips in a high street, greasy-spoon joint.

On Sundays, after church, I would visit a different pub each week, order half a pint of bitter at about 12 pence and then, for my midday meal, sit as close as possible to the complimentary Sunday platter of gherkins and diced cheddar. It rarely took long for a sharp-eyed proprietor, or more usually his wife, to notice the voracity of my appetite for cheese and gherkins and move the platter beyond my reach. The diminutive, Irish poet James Stephens (1880-1950), in a scurrilous piece of verse, aptly expresses my hurt feelings at this treatment. Here are two stanzas:

A Glass of Beer

*The lanky hank of a she in the inn over there
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer
May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.*

*If I asked her master he’d give me a cask a day
But she, with the beer at hand, not a gill would arrange!
May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten, and may
The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange!*

James Stephens was as close to a leprechaun as any Irish nationalist could ever be. Only 4 feet 10 inches tall, he was a notable novelist, lyric poet and good friend of James Joyce, who asked him to finish

his last great, gobbledygook of a novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, should Joyce himself be unable to do so. A formidable task, because few people, including myself, have ever been able to finish reading it. To finish writing it would daunt even the most erudite, articulate and loquacious of leprechauns.

Sugared sour must sauce the bitter sweet

Last Monday, ambling the ambulatories of the Cathedral in my cassock, I happened upon a young, jolly and newly married couple. The wife told me that she'd once lived in Vicars Close, the lovely, cobbled and oldest, purely residential, medieval street in Wells, Britain and Europe. This was because her father had been a Cathedral virger for a while. To live in beautiful places comes at a cost, though. Grade One listed buildings, it seems, are not permitted to fit double glazed windows and so the lovely Vicars Close homes are draughty and expensive to heat. It is the sort of cost I would be only too happy to pay for such a residence. There is no pleasure without pain.

To be a priest on the paradisaic island of St Helena meant accepting a very modest salary. Again, this was a cost well worth paying. There's no pleasure without pain. The pleasure of life itself involves acceptance of the pain of death. There is no pleasure without pain. The joy and even delirium of human love, inevitably involves the pain of self-sacrifice and of opening the self to the possibility of rejection. It is a pain that sometimes overwhelms us and can sadly lead us to question the worth of it all. Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a poem entitled. *No Pleasure Without Pain*, which ends as follows:

*What life were love, if love were free from pain?
But oh that pain with pleasure matched should meet!
Why did the course of nature so ordain
That sugared sour must sauce the bitter sweet?
Which sour from sweet might any means remove,
What hap, what heaven, what life, were like to love!*

In 1937, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer published a book that has become a Christian classic: "*The Cost of Discipleship*." The consolations and joys of discipleship, he argues, involve radical sacrifice. He himself lived his discipleship in just such a way and it cost him, ultimately, the extreme pain of martyrdom. As did the radical loving, living and forgiving life of Jesus of Nazareth. There is no profound pleasure, no authentic love, no life worth living without the pain of sacrifice. It is what the Cross symbolises and teaches us. We exist to learn to love, sacrificially.

Pumpkin seeds, cider and William Byrd

It is Tuesday evening and dark outside. On the desk beside me is a bowl of home roasted and spiced pumpkin seeds to crunch, and a mug of cider to quaff, decanted from a gallon bottle bought at a small cider mill near Othery, on the Somerset Levels. I have just returned from choral Evensong in the Cathedral. It took me imaginatively and emotionally to the very gates of heaven.

All the music was from my beloved 17th century. There was William Byrd's Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis and also his lovely anthem, "Teach me O Lord...." The versicles and responses were by William Smith, whose final, lingering "Amen" to the Evening Collect always transports me to heaven and recalls my dear old Mother, who taught me to say the Evening Collect before I went to sleep as a little boy. The Vicars Choral were joined by the boy's choir, rather than the girls, and the Byrd anthem had lots of tremulous little treble solos that all but broke the heart.

Best of all, our new Precentor, the most delightful of young, family men, has reintroduced the singing in full of the psalms set for the day. We had all 72 verses of Psalm 78. What a bonus! Unutterably lovely.



Vicar's Close: Wells, looking north

(570) “This and That” - 13 October 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Harvest Festival - St John's Boldre

It is Harvest Festival time. In small country churches it's an invitation to decorate the building to exuberant excess. Churchgoers can be as overwhelmed as caterpillars in a field full of cabbages, mice in a field of ripened wheat, or joy-inebriated bees buzzing over acres of golden, flowering canola.

We plough the fields

This is not so in a large cathedral. The space is too great and so visually, harvest festivals are celebrated more modestly. In Wells Cathedral there were no decorative stooks of wheat, or bales of hay; no pyramids of parsnips or towers of turnips; no cascades of apples or barrels of Somerset cider. Instead, just a couple of tables of worthy items, brought along by members of the congregation.

The music was exuberantly harvest-oriented though and the sermon too was wittily and thoughtfully apposite. My only disappointment was a new version of the hymn “*We plough the fields and scatter.....*”. Though sung to the rousing, traditional tune, the words had been modernised in so cringe-making and banal a way, it set my teeth gnashing and turned my praise to anguish. Here are the second and third verses:

*With many new machines now
We do the work each day;
We reap the fields with combines,
We bale the new-mown hay.
But still it's God who gives us
Inventive skill and drives
Which lighten labour's drudgery
And give us better lives.*

*He only is the maker
Of galaxies and stars;
Of birds and beasts and flowers,
And any life on Mars.
Atomic powers obey him,
Yet still the birds are fed;
By him our prayer is answered:
Give us our daily bread*

*All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

It is dire stuff, enough to make my own light verse seem almost heavy. I prefer John Betjeman's parody, which addresses problems, thankfully, now being dealt with.

*We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground
So that no wicked wild flowers
Upon our farm be found.
We like whatever helps us
To line our purse with pence;
The twenty-four-hour broiler-house
And neat electric fence.*

*We fire the fields for harvest,
The hedges swell the flame,
The oak trees and the cottages
From which our fathers came.
We give no compensation,
The earth is ours today,
And if we lose on arable,
The bungalows will pay.*

*All concrete sheds around us and Jaguars in the yard,
The telly lounge and deep-freeze are ours from working hard.*

Betjemans's best piece of verse to do with the harvest, however, is his “*Diary of a Church Mouse*”, a real gem that's well worth Googling to be reminded of, or to discover for the first time.

The best harvest comment of all, this year, was a tiny sermon in itself and given to me over coffee after the Cathedral service by a 90 year old friend and retired priest: “*A Vicar, leaning on a garden wall, said to the gardener working hard on the other side: 'It's a fine job you and God are making of that*

garden.' To which the gardener replied, 'you should see what a mess it was when left to God alone.'” That puts fashionable “rewilding” in it’s place. Even better, it reminds us that the part God plays in the production of the harvest has more to do with the creation of the predictable laws that enable harvests, than with divine interference or fiddling with those laws.

Fritters from scrumped corn

Diana and I sampled an illicit harvest a week or two ago. We helped ourselves to a couple of corn cobs from a field we were passing. Our motive was scientific curiosity. We wished to compare the corn grown commercially, here in Somerset, with the corn we grew in our Australian garden and on the Rhodesian farm upon which I worked as a student, which had white grains that were almost as sweet and even tastier than sweet corn when eaten young. This was not so with our two scrumped, commercially grown, local cobs. The grains were yellow, tough and not at all sweet. We didn’t waste them though. We removed the cooked grains from the cob, whizzed them coarsely in a blender with egg, flour and coriander leaves and then turned them into delicious, chewy fritters.

On St Michael and All Angels’ Sunday, we attended the 10.30am Eucharist in Ripon Cathedral, the north of England’s equivalent of Wells. The city’s population is about 17,000, compared to Wells’ 12,000. We were staying with a University College of Rhodesia & Nyasaland contemporary of mine and were well wined, dined and looked after. Unlike Wells, Ripon has a parish of its own to mind and our friend was once its churchwarden, as well as the Mayor of Ripon. The Eucharist was similar to Wells and the sermon was a fine one from a 90 year old, retired bishop.

St Leonard’s, Chapel-le-dale

The journey across the Pennines to get to Ripon was spectacular and in a wet week bountifully, beautifully sunny. We stopped for lunch at a tiny, 17th century, limestone oblong of a church, pleasing both without and within, just because of its simplicity. Almost the antithesis of a cathedral, it’s St Leonard’s Church, Chapel-le-dale, near to the Ribbleshead viaduct. A commemorative plaque reads:

To the memory of those who through accidents lost their lives, in constructing the railway works, between Settle, and Dent Head. This tablet was erected at the joint expense, of their fellow workmen and the midland railway company 1869 to 1876.

To finish, a few lines from John Betjeman:

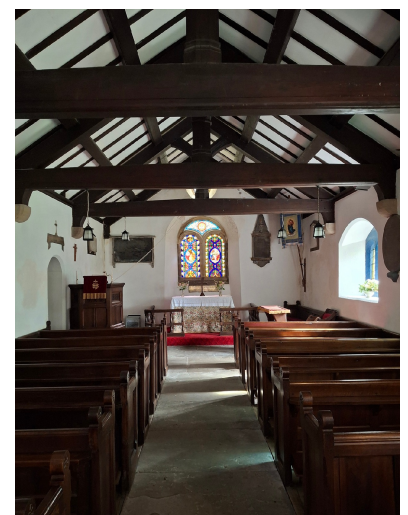
The Diary of a Church Mouse

*...For me the only feast at all
Is Autumn's Harvest Festival,
When I can satisfy my want
With ears of corn around the font.
I climb the eagle's brazen head
To burrow through a loaf of bread.
I scramble up the pulpit stair
And gnaw the marrows hanging there....
But how annoying when one finds*

*That other mice with pagan minds
Come into church my food to share
Who have no proper business there.
Two field mice who have no desire
To be baptized, invade the choir.
A large and most unfriendly rat
Comes in to see what we are at.
He says he thinks there is no God
And yet he comes ... it's rather odd....*



*St Leonard's
Chapel-le-dale
Yorkshire*



(569) “This and That” - 6 October 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

There is no space more private, tranquil and blessed than your home’s very own shower cubicle and bathroom. The first stanza of an amusing light, but by no means shallow, verse by W H Auden gets it right, though his verse celebrates a pleasure far more “primal” than mere showering:

The Geography of the House

*Seated after breakfast
In this white-tiled cabin
Arabs call the House where
Everybody goes,
Even melancholics
Raise a cheer to Mrs.
Nature for the primal
Pleasure She bestows.....*

He is right. We returned home last Thursday from seven days and nights spent in the homes of friends and relatives ‘Up North’. We delighted in their company, wit, good humour and boundless generosity, but wrestled with the over complicated and sophisticated plumbing of their shower cubicles. Once back home in our own familiar bathroom I was filled with peace and joy beyond telling.

Little emanations of joy and comfort

To be entertained in the homes of like-minded, or even not so like-minded others, provides a chance to raid bookshelves and magazine racks. By chance I came across some words from Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667), one of the greatest prose writers in our language, dubbed the “Shakespeare of Divines”. His sentiments gladdened my grand-parental heart:

“No man can tell but he that loves his children, how many delicious accents make a man's heart dance in the pretty conversation of those dear pledges; their childishness, their stammering, their little angers, their innocence, their imperfections, their necessities, are so many little emanations of joy and comfort to him that delights in their persons and society.”



Stafford Castle

A Claytons Castle

Our first three days away were spent in Bowness, the part of Windermere adjacent to the Lake. We were guests of a feisty aunt of Diana’s son-in-law and much of our journey to visit her was in pouring rain. We stuttered and stammered through Bristol and then whizzed up the M5 and M6, stopping for lunch in Stafford, simply because we had never visited it although I am Staffordshire born. Because our “allotment” produces spinach profusely, I’ve learned how to make tasty quiches that use it generously and although best eaten hot, they make a fine picnic lunch. We ate a quarter of one each, with a mug or soup, beside a peaceful golf course,

before finding and exploring Stafford Castle, which is more a Victorian “folly” than the genuine medieval article. What Australians would call a “Claytons castle”.

The word “Claytons” is an Australian version of the word “ersatz” and means inferior to, or not the real thing. It was originally the brand name of a non-alcoholic, non-carbonated drink, concocted and promoted to resemble whisky. It was widely marketed in Australia and New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s as “*the drink you have when you're not having a drink*”, part of a drive to lower alcohol related road accidents and deaths.

Our first day in the Lake District was wet and windy. We ambled around Bowness, popping into charity shops on the lookout for curtains for Diana’s daughter and jerseys for me. Jerseys are best bought far away from home, to avoid being embraced by recent widows, emotionally overcome to see a fine and healthy fellow dressed in their late husband’s gear.

In the afternoon we boarded a bus to the village of Grasmere, which for fourteen years was the home of William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy and considered by them to be: “*the loveliest spot that man hath ever found.*” Even in the wet and wind it is indeed a lovely spot. We spent some time in a bookshop there and among a fine selection of poetry books, I discovered the collected works of A E Stallings, one of my very favourite contemporary poets. We went on to walk the village and visit the parish church, St Oswald’s and its graveyard with the tombs of Wordsworth, his wife Mary and sister Dorothy.

Crunchily delicious

Our six days away included two journeys of incomparable beauty. The first of these was on our second day in the Lake District, but only after an extended ramble around the very best of kitchen and home ware retailers, *Lakeland*. The ingenious gadgets available to ease the life of home-minders and would-be chefs are mind boggling. Only our daily recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, with its request to be delivered from temptation, saved us from profligate extravagance. We were also treated to a demonstration, by a pair of local chefs, on how to cook Thai chicken wings to perfection. A sampled result of their efforts was crunchily delicious and we asked one of them to identify a small, cooking implement he used, that seemed to be intriguingly efficient. We were told that although they are not on sale in *Lakeland*, professional chefs use them every day and consider them invaluable. They are known as *Chef’s tweezers* and we intend ordering a pair on line.

After *Lakeland*, we drove in bright sunshine to Keswick and then on towards Cockermouth, before turning south to meander along minor roads to the lowland reaches of the incomparably lovely valley of the Cumbrian River Esk known as Eskdale. The name Esk comes from the Celtic word *Iska*, which means “*abounding in fish*”. Before being ruined by industrialisation and underfunded and incompetent water companies all Britain’s rivers abounded with fish and so, unsurprisingly, there are five different river Esks in the United Kingdom. The Cumbrian river Esk is still reckoned to be a fine angling river for sea trout and salmon.

Britain's most outrageous road

As we drove gently up the sunlit, vivid green Esk river valley of paddocks backed by mountains, we were held up for a while by a flock of white faced, black sheep, brilliantly marshalled and controlled by a pair of vigilant dogs. We munched pieces of baguette and nogs of Stilton cheese as we waited for them to reach and pass us and then, as the shadows lengthened we began the drive up “*Hard Knott Pass*,” described in the Guardian as “*one of Britain’s most outrageous roads.*” With *Wrynose Pass* to scale and descend as well, beyond the valley that separates the two passes, it is Britain’s most exhilarating drive. There are frighteningly steep twists and turns, sheep to avoid, innumerable hairpin bends, a constantly disintegrating road surface, ravaged by high rainfall, frost and snow and no wider than the wheels of a car. As it that is not enough there are also unguarded drops that plummet hundreds of feet down to rocky moorland and scree.

This was the third time we had driven these two passes and because my eye’s are still shonky Diana was at the wheel, allowing me fully to appreciate just how magnificent the views and breathtaking the journey.

(568) “This and That” - 29 September 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*

A diminutive boy, bizarrely surnamed Hercules, swaggered into the art classroom of a school in the Borough of Ealing in 1971 and made straight for the teacher’s desk. Without acknowledging the impressive, six feet one inch tall teacher behind the desk, he picked up a sheaf of student paintings, waiting to be marked, ripped them in two and flung them on the floor. He then met the teacher’s eye, gave him an insolent grin, turned his back and headed for his own desk. A nasty little bugger. Or in today’s speak, the sad victim of a school system and society that had failed him. Both judgements are valid in their own way.

Destined for Mashonaland

The teacher, in his twenties, had been brought up and educated conservatively in Africa, where the cane was still freely wielded and only the very weakest and emotionally fragile of teachers terrorised. For a year and a half, in the Borough of Ealing, this teacher held at bay, humoured, minded and sometimes even taught the likes of Hercules, as well as more admirable and well-adjusted pupils. It proved to be one of the most significant periods of his life. It turned him back to God.

At the end of the 1972 academic year, he caught a train to Woking to attend a selection conference for potential ordinands to the priesthood, a candidate for the wondrous diocese of Mashonaland. Nearly all his fellow potential ordinands appeared young, public school educated, confident, plummy-voiced and vicarage naturals. He felt out of place, an exotic, a wild colonial boy, educated in Rhodesia at a tough, government boarding school called Guinea Fowl, the last stop before a borstal and then at the mellifluously named, University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

To his surprise he was accepted, possibly for being so refreshingly and eloquently different and safely destined for a diocese thousands of miles beyond the refined Church in England’s horizon.

Brilliantly mediocre

More than fifty years later, retired to England where his path to the priesthood first began, he looks back on it all with gratitude, convinced that he was born to be a parish priest. Not least because there is something so brilliantly and even dazzlingly mediocre about him. The best of parish priests need to be first class second-raters, not geniuses, boffins or academic whizz kids. Eloquent and articulate yes, all things to all men and women indeed, Jacks or Jells of all trades certainly and lovers of the common man most definitely, but intellectual *creme de la creme*, not at all.

Rarely was he ever first in his class, more usually it was third, fourth or fifth and in less than impressive educational establishments. Nor did he ever sail through important exams, being more adept at sailing close to the wind. Except for his O-levels, in which he did surprisingly well, he merely scraped through all the important exams that followed, a last minute, frantic crammer. His honours degree in English was a Third. Though being a well-read and eloquent fellow, if anyone ever sneered at this, he had the perfect retort. He quoted a biographer of Cardinal Newman who’d managed a mere pass degree at Oxford: “*At least he was spared the ignominy of a second*”.

All Saints, Gatooma



All Saints, Gatooma (now Kadoma)

What do I best remember about the very first parish of which I was rector and where I discovered myself to fit the role so well and to revel in it? It was *All Saints, Gatooma*, the centre of a farming and mining district in the middle of Rhodesia. The parish had been bequeathed a small part in the ownership of a local gold mine and because the price of gold was soaring at the time, it was a wealthy parish.

I loved the church building, rectory and garden. We added a lovely chapel to the church, an en suite bathroom to the rectory,



All Saints chapel, Gatooma

built a completely new church for the neighbouring, African Parish of Rimuka and walled and hugely developed our own rectory garden. We also began a family with the arrival of two blond sons, learned to love most of our parishioners and to tolerate the few awkward ones. The most difficult were the purportedly ‘spirit-filled’, over religious types. We also took up playing badminton with gusto in the fine church hall and were taught how to make samoosas at home, including the wafer thin pastry, thanks to the friendliness of the wives of local Indian storekeepers.

Humming bees and soaring swifts

For several of the years we were there a guerrilla war was at its height, a curfew in place and parts of the parish were visited in armed convoys. What fun we had though, and what splendid church wardens. One of them, on holiday in England, sent us a postcard of a ruined, roofless, windowless abbey with the cautionary comment: *See what happens when you fart in church*. When dining with him you could see the stars through the tattily thatched roof of his own house.

Many parishioners come back readily to mind, even after forty years. Old Mrs Marillier, so gentle, accepting and solicitous of others, even on her death bed. Julia Bezuidenhout, who sent us pieces of luridly coloured cake with unpredictable frequency, wrapped in tissue paper and not much enjoyed. Rusty, the local sewage farm manager, who responded memorably to a visitor who held out his hand in greeting while saying: *Ian Clarke C.I.D.*, by retorting: *Rusty Nixon S.H.I.T.* The young wives who gathered with mine to socialise, amuse and educate their lively, lovely infants together. The gentle Goanese doctor who, when we apologised for calling him out to one of our boys at an ungodly hour said: *“I have children of my own, I know what it is like. Call me at any time, day or night.”* Another local doctor who claimed to be able to foretell accurately the sex of a child well before it was born. When talking to an expectant mother, he would say: *“It is going to be a boy. See, I will write it down on my desk calendar on the due date.”* He would write not *boy* but *girl*. If it turned out to be a boy he was right and if a girl he could show his calendar to prove himself right as well.

It was a parish that trained me well. To sit in the chapel each morning with the window open and say Matins was to be deeply, deeply blessed. Outside was a huge eucalyptus tree that shimmered and hummed with a million bees as hundreds of nesting swifts soared, swooped and called. Such blessings these days are conferred in the glorious Lady Chapel of Wells Cathedral. *“O how amiable are thy dwellings, thou Lord of hosts! My heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.”*



All Saints, Gatooma (now Kadoma)

(567) “This and That” - 22 September 2024

Long car journeys from Somerset to visit our families clustered around the corner of Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, like long sermons, require imaginative mind wandering if we are to avoid being driven bonkers by boredom.

Aphids and aerodynamics



Silver Street lime trees, Wells

Hilary, our beloved Ford Fiesta, is parked in *Silver Street* under great lime trees, a six minute walk from home. Lurking beneath the leaves of these deeply shady trees are thousands upon thousands of aphids, whose mosquito-like mouthparts pierce the veins of the leaves to suck out the sugars and amino acids that sustain their miniature beings. The concentration of amino acids in the tree sap is low and in order to obtain a sufficient amount of the life-giving acids, the tiny creatures guzzle huge, belly-distending volumes of the sugary liquid. Then, as if in a bid to avoid any fashionable accusations of obesity and sugar addiction, they excrete the excess of sugars as tacky, liquid waste.

As a result *Hilary*, for the past month, like an old-fashioned vitamin pill has been well and truly sugared, to the delight of local flies, bees, wasps and moulds. Last week, before we headed west for a stint of grand parenting, we gingerly opened the car doors to slip slyly inside and avoid antagonising the wasps and bees. The journey began with a discussion about aerodynamics. Do the car's stickiness and mouldiness increase its resistance to wind and so raise petrol consumption? With the help of

abstruse mathematical gymnastics, we concluded that this was certain to be so and that our petrol consumption was likely to be increased by .000031%. When engaged in imaginative higher mathematics of this sort, there is little chance of being driven bonkers by boredom .

Amusingly idiotic

On our journeys all sorts of triggers to imaginative speculation occur. When we pass through the village of Corsley, for example, my ear for assonance and rhyme invariably prompts me to ask Diana: “Who was coarser, Hengist or Horsa?”. Later on, caught up in the Stonehenge bottle neck, the prehistoric monument's name prompts the same question. Diana is a remarkable companion, she always chuckles, as do I myself, being a great appreciator of my own jokes. It is the idiocy and predictability of the question that amuses us.

For many years I assumed that the question originated in that best of all histories of England, Sellars and Yeatman's “1066 and All That”. I am wrong. It comes from a verse by Desmond Carter:

New Light on Ancient Heroes

*Hengist was coarser than Horsa,
And Horsa was awfully coarse.
Horsa drank whiskey,
Told tales that were risqué,
But Hengist was in a divorce.*

*Horsa grew coarser and coarser,
But Hengist was coarse all his life.
That reprobate Horsa
Drank tea from a saucer,
But Hengist ate peas with his knife.*

Sellars and Yeatman's masterpiece does have something to say about Hengist and Horsa, but not in verse: “Memorable among the Saxon warriors were Hengist and his wife (or horse), Horsa. Hengist made himself King in the South. Thus Hengist was the first English King and his wife (or horse), Horsa, the first English Queen (or horse). The country was now almost entirely inhabited by Saxons and was therefore renamed England, and thus (naturally) soon became C. of E.”

Bertie, Gertie and Andover

When we travel by car the driver expects the passenger to mention any change in the speed limit, in case it is unnoticed. Whenever Diana says: “Thirty”, I find myself asking a question from a tale of my father’s which, like Horsa’s, according to Carter’s verse, is a tad “*risqué*”. I ask: “*What did Bertie say to Gertie, when he lifted up his shirty?*” We both know the answer, and so don’t need to repeat it, but it invariably raises a smile and prompts fond reminiscent reflections on the old fellow who, although born over a hundred years ago and a clergyman, was certainly no prude.

When we bypass Andover my invariable comment is: “*’And over fist!*” and last week, on our way home at half past midnight, having said this yet again, we went on to reflect upon the origin of the phrase “*hand over fist*” and its precise meaning. We concluded, rightly, that originally it must have been a nautical term, to do with climbing a rope, or hauling one in. It seems that the first version of the saying, dating from the mid eighteenth century, was “hand over hand”: “*A lusty young Man attempted to go down (hand over hand, as the Workmen call it) by means of a single Rope.*” It was only in the next century that “*hand over fist*” took over, a predictable change because it is more accurately descriptive. When we take hold of a rope to climb it or pull it, we do indeed make a fist round it and then reach forward with our other, open hand, and so on. The original meaning of the phrase was to make “sure and steady progress”. Today it almost always refers to making money and fast.

Fame of notoriety

Andover, like Basingstoke, Woking, Swindon, Kettering, Reading and too many other fair sized English towns, perhaps unfairly, we consider best avoided than sought out. Andover does have some sort of claim to fame though. In 2021, according to the *Andover Advertiser*, the town was voted by *Lovehoney*, a booming sex toy retailer, to be the United Kingdom’s “sexiest place”, possibly based on their own retail figures. Is that really a claim to fame or to notoriety? If fame, then what is the world coming to? Nothing much really, because *’twas ever thus*.

Way back in the mid nineteen seventies, I recall my boss, the Dean of Harare Cathedral, asking the very same question. He was a gifted, troubled, larger than life, great big, bearded, bully of a bachelor. He said to me in conversation over one of his gargantuan, post early morning Eucharist breakfasts, vis a vis something or other, “What’s the world coming to, Andy? What’s the world coming to? It’s just one vast, frantic, frenzied, fornicatorium.” Another memorable phrase of ponder as we traverse from west to east and back again in our lime-honeyed Hilary



Croquet, Bishop's Palace lawn, Wells

(566) “This and That” - 15 September 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Memorable words or phrases can stop the heart. One such came our way last week in an email from a doughty worshipper at St John’s Boldre. It was a phrase of just four words, quoted from an old lady and they stopped my heart. They said so much in so little. There was a whole poem in them. Diana and I dwelt upon and talked them over in delight and our hearts went out to the old girl. May blessings abundant be hers. I cannot repeat them because to do so would break a confidence.

Making such music as lives still

It is the poetic truth of the Christian narrative that makes it so utterly irresistible. R S Thomas’ verse “*The Musician*” offers a glimpse of the poetry that lies at the very heart of our Faith. After succinctly describing the intensity of Fritz Kreisler playing the violin at a concert he attended, the poet goes on to liken Christ on the Cross to:

*This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.*

*So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns’ halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.*

You have to be a dull, unimaginative clod not to be intrigued and moved by that. The whole poem is available on the Web, but because I printed it in full a year or so ago, I refrain from doing so again.

A kinky relationship

Diana and I sometimes dog-sit for her son ’Pula and family, as well as for my son David and his. ’Pula’s family have two dogs. The first is Frida, a gentle, late middle-aged and affectionate black Labrador, whose *raison d’être* and greatest joy is to chase sticks or a ball to the point of exhaustion. The second is Sybil, a miniature dachshund, also affectionate, but otherwise totally different. She’s young, saucy, self-willed, yappy, impulsive, uncontrollable off the lead, utterly incorrigible and yet has a way of looking at you out of the corner of an eye, that shows its white and melts your heart, rendering anything other than forgiveness of her many sins unthinkable. Her relationship to Frida is very close and fascinatingly kinky. Their playful, bared-teeth clashing kisses are remarkable to behold. Taken for a walk together, the large with the small, the docile with the aggressive, the gentle with the saucy, the plodder with the pert, the silent with the noisy, the black with the tan, make for a local spectacle.

Last week I came across a poem called *Dachshund*. It is by a fine poet and so has much more to it than the sentimental tosh poured out by too many dog lovers. What is more, it contains at least a couple of memorable phrases of the sort I talk about earlier. The poet is an American, William Jay Smith 1918-2015:

Dachshund

*The Dachshund leads a quiet life
Not far above the ground;
He takes an elongated wife,
They travel all around.*

*They leave the lighted metropole;
Nor turn to look behind
Upon the headlands of the soul,
The tundras of the mind.*

*They climb together through the dusk
To ask the Lost-and-Found
For information on the stars
Not far above the ground.*

*The Dachshunds seem to journey on:
And following them, I
Take up my monocle, the Moon,
And gaze into the sky.*

*Pursuing them with comic art
Beyond the cosmic goal,
I see the whole within the part,
The part within the whole;*

*See planets wheeling overhead,
Mysterious and slow,
While morning buckles on his red,
And on the Dachshunds go.*

Shrewd, sagacious, wise, cunning

Last week I met a retired priest who was trained at the same theological college as I was, St Paul's, in Grahamstown, South Africa. He was a student there a number of years after me, but we were able to indulge in some animated reminiscing.

The College principal in his time and mine was a fine New Testament scholar called John Suggit who was trained at the now long closed *Wells Theological College*. Some months ago Diana and I attended Evensong in the tiny medieval chapel at the top of Vicar's Close here in Wells. While doing so I imagined the slightly built, hooked nosed, twinkling-eyed old fellow as a young, clever and heavily cloaked ordinand, kneeling devoutly in that ancient building on bitter winter mornings, because in those long gone days it was the theological college's very own place of worship. John Suggit was a notable New Testament scholar who read the Gospel in the Grahamstown College chapel Eucharists, direct from a Greek text, translating into English, at sight. His nickname was "Phronimos" (*shrewd, sagacious, wise, and also, possibly cunning*).



Medieval Chapel, vicars Close, Wells

I came to the College more than half way through the first of the three required academic years, already a graduate and so considered to be more than capable of catching up. I also came direct from England, which to Phronimos' mind, was the source of all good scholarship, so he expected me to be a scholar of scholars and insisted that I took New Testament Greek, with two fellow students who already had degrees in classical Greek. Adept at passing exams, if only by the skin of my teeth, but certainly no scholar, I triumphed by learning the *Revised Standard Version* of The Epistle to the Hebrews off by heart. He was not impressed.

Diana and I visited him in Cape Town in 2012. Then aged ninety he was full of friendly hospitality and discerning faith. He died at 101 in 2023. The Archbishop of Cape Town preached his funeral homily. May he rest in peace.

(565) “This and That” - 8 September 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

If clerical celibacy had continued to be enforced after the English Reformation there would have been no Andrew Marvell, Sir Christopher Wren, John and Charles Wesley, Jane Austen, Charlotte, Emily and Ann Brontë, Matthew Arnold, Lewis Carroll, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Baden Powell, Cecil Rhodes, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Orville and Wilbur Wright, Dorothy Sayers, Virginia Wade, Theresa May or Andrew Neaum.

A passionate, platonic love affair

There were nine sons or daughters of clergymen in my second Australian parish, the very best, most hard working and regular attenders of church. Another four were my own children. Such a concentration of useful clerical offspring in a single parish provides the best of reasons to deplore the enforced celibacy of parish clergy. The most cynical though witty observation on celibacy, however, comes from a Frenchman quoted by Arthur Calder Marshall in his biography of the intriguing crackpot, Father Ignatius of Llanthony: “Of all sexual aberrations I find celibacy the hardest to comprehend”. Witty indeed, but unfair. When voluntarily embraced, celibacy can be wholly admirable and even heroic.



Maude Royden

Maud Royden (1876-1956) was a notable Church of England preacher, pacifist, suffragist and campaigner for the ordination of women. At the outbreak of the Second World War she was courageous enough to renounce her pacifism, convinced of the necessity to fight against the evils of Nazi Germany. At the age of sixty-eight she married an eighty five year old, recently widowed clergyman who died just two months later. In her autobiography, *A Threefold Cord* she revealed that the two of them had had a passionate but platonic love for each other since 1901. Platonic because her beloved clergyman was already married to a ‘mentally fragile’ wife, and so Royden’s attachment to him involved a form of heroic celibacy, based on conviction and principle. It was sacrifice of a sort rarely heard of these days.

Sizzling esoteric gossip

To have been brought up in a vicarage, rectory and mission-station’s residence, I consider to have been one of God’s greatest blessings to me. It provided the most stimulating, invigorating, and healthy of environments. The phone was always ringing. Interesting and varied people rang the door bell: beggars and old lags, the distressed and the elated, the rich and poor, all sorts and conditions of men and women. The sitting room regularly entertained uproarious clergymen, proving to be a base canard the old joke that clergy, like manure, are fine and useful when thinly spread, but stinking and offensive gathered together in a heap. A house full of clergy, in my youth, rocked with mirth, and sizzled with esoteric gossip.

Vicarage children have access to their father’s study and workplace. When very little, my youngest daughter adored my study. She liked to empty onto the floor the fascinating, top left hand drawer of the desk: paperclips, glue sticks, balls of string, pencils, pens, sharpeners, discarded watches, a broken rosary, wrecked dog collars and dog collar studs, bulldog clips and more. When denied access she would lie on her back outside and drum on the door with her feet, a salutary example to those arranging their wedding with me of what they were likely to be letting themselves in for.

For vicarage children there are church organs to fiddle on, towers to climb, bells to ring, candle ends to collect and melt down, illicit sips of communion wine and melt-in-the-mouth wafers to pinch. There are musty vestries to hide in and choirs to join. There are tombstones to decipher, hide behind and be frightened of in the dark. There are halls in which to play badminton and church grounds to defend

against invaders. There are youth groups to join and odd, interesting jobs to be done with dad. My father made a set of oak altar rails for the little church on Tristan da Cunha, I helped to sand them down.

Paganini or Page Nine

To be a clergy son or daughter means that your swearing carries more weight than anyone else's, and it was always just that little bit more satisfying and easy to shock people. My wife and I decided to teach our children to express profound feelings verbally in ways that allowed them the satisfaction of swearing without actually doing so. We reinterpreted exotic sounding but harmless words to replace swear words. One such was *Paganini*, a word which, if said with venom, sounds easily as evil as a Niccolo Paganini solo violin cadenza and as bad, if not worse, as the vilest of swear words. When spuriously translated into English as *Page Nine*, it proved to be sufficiently interesting to raise eyebrows, intriguingly enigmatic. Our oldest son once said the word so venomously to a tormentor at school, the object of his wrath informed their teacher who warned my son off the use of so 'vile' a word.

Giggling gaggles of servers

My four children were invaluable to me as a parish priest, not least for providing a refreshing doorway out of piety, make-believe and hypocrisy into reality and sanity. For a while my two boys, separated from their two sisters by a gap of five and six years, provided access to both secondary and primary school at the same time. A senior youth group around the boys and a junior one around the girls proved to be remarkably vibrant. They helped gather such a gaggle and giggle of servers that on Sundays it was sometimes difficult to move in the sanctuary without knocking down an acolyte. It affirmed the truth of the well-worn justification for a multiplicity of acolytes: "Why do you have so many children holding candles in the sanctuary?" "It's not the children who hold the candles, it is the candles who hold the children."

When troubled by local, vandalising yobbos, my boys provided me with inside information and advice. They helped identify a young pyromaniac who set fire to the church hall and learned to answer the phone, entertain a regular, intellectually disabled visitor as well as other strange and less than strange parishioners. They were normal enough to enable my wife and I thoroughly to identify with the worries of parents in the parish generally and abnormal enough for us to be thoroughly proud of them. They sang in the choir, criticised my sermons robustly and provided sermon illustrations and subject matter aplenty. They remain, in their middle age, my pride and joy.



Corfe Castle, Dorset

(564) “This and That” - 1 September 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

To say boo to a goose can lead to a heavy fine or even gaol these days. It's possible to feel vulnerable to accusations of sexual harassment even when attending the daily Office and Eucharist in the Cathedral's Lady Chapel, here in Wells.

Winking and blinking

The chairs are arranged in a semicircle before the altar. This means that during services worshippers sit and stand facing about half of their number. Since a recent eye operation my right eye is now long-sighted, a little blurred and views the world through spectacles minus a lens. The left eye remains short-sighted and views the world through the same spectacles, but with a lens. The two eyes are not in synchrony. This means I am continually closing one to test it in relation to the other and also need to close the right eye to read a psalm or canticle and then the left to lift my heart in praise to sun-brightened, stained glass windows and a gloriously ribbed and vaulted roof. To those opposite me, however, I must appear to be winking at them.



On the horizon, viewed from Wells, Glastonbury Tor

Fortunately, in such a glorious space, no one is likely to rest their eye, other than momentarily, upon a winking, blinking retired old God-botherer, when there is so much else to spark the imagination, delight the eye and lift the heart.

The faery, home of Gwyn ab Nudd

In our kitchen there is a glut of onions, shallots, beans, potatoes, courgettes and squash. Our productive vegetable garden is a couple of miles out of town, at Diana's daughter's house in West Horrington. It is three hundred or more feet higher in altitude than our small flower garden in Wells and has a spectacular view. We look up from weed grubbing across fields and woodland to the great sentinel of the Somerset Level's, *Glastonbury Tor*, half a dozen miles away, topped by its impressive church relic, a 15th century, roofless bell tower.

We passed through Glastonbury last week, by chance rather than choice. It's a town steeped in Christian history, but rivalled or complemented, depending upon your point of view, by all sorts and varieties of bead, bangle and bauble bearing paganism, some of it so wacky it helps ground Christianity firmly on its Jesus of Nazareth declared Petrine rock of sanity and good sense.

Beaded, baubled and bangled denizens and pilgrims claim, for example, that beneath the Tor is a hidden cave leading to Annwyn, the land of faery, home of Gwyn ab Nudd, lord of the Celtic otherworld, and to the 'Cauldron of Rebirth' from which slain warriors rise, reborn. Though to be fair, the wackier side of Christianity is associated with the place too. The Holy Grail is said to have been brought to Glastonbury and hidden there by Joseph of Arimathea. Nonetheless, it is a relief to leave Glastonbury and return to well church and Christianity steeped Wells, if you happen to be a thoroughgoing Christian.

Loony ley lines

Strange things happen in our West Horrington vegetable garden. For years we've planted, reaped and delighted in gem squash, a widely grown and popular southern African vegetable. Perfectly round in shape, the fruit grow to be hardly larger than a cricket ball and when eaten young, cut in half



Glastonbury Tor Tower

and topped by a generous dab of butter, even the seeds and skin, as well as the flesh, make for a delicious, nostalgic-for-Africa feed. We grew them successfully and prolifically at Boldre and in my last Australian parish, but here the vines produce weirdly gargantuan fruit. They don't stop at cricket ball size, they go on and on until they're as large, vapid and empty of taste as marrows.

Being a natural sceptic the greatest of miracles in my life is that I am a convinced believer in God. Less than sceptical moments do occur though and these obscenely large gem squash encourage them. I find myself speculating that the vegetable garden's direct line of sight to Glastonbury Tor allows mystical energy, conveyed by some sort of inimical ley line, to corrupt and misshape our vegetable garden's pride and joy in revenge for my disbelief in and mockery of loony ley lines.

A Backhanded compliment

Last Sunday we forsook the Cathedral for Croscombe, a village just up the road to Shepton Mallet with a beautiful church and a small but lovely congregation of thoroughgoing Anglicans. I took the service and preached a reworked Boldre sermon. It appeared to be well received, though sermons are far too easily and casually complimented. I sometimes find myself praising those I've not even listened to, in misguided kindness to a preacher anxiously angling for favourable comment. I prefer backhanded compliments myself. They are easier to field and usually more genuine. At Croscombe I warmed to a lady who, eyeing up and down the bashed in old fogey of a priest from just up the road that I am, and whose sermon, it seems, she'd actually listened to, asked "Did you really write that?" How do you respond to such a question, except to say, in feigned modesty: "Aw shucks. Yes I did, every word of it."



St Mary's, Croscombe, Somerset

Diversity

A week or so ago, we returned from ten days away, starved of Choral Evensongs. The Cathedral choir was still on holiday and the visiting choir for the week was from Coventry Cathedral. Our expectations were not high because we'd been told, by a local music connoisseur, that the choir wasn't up too much. How wrong he was.

The visitors were far more ethnically diverse than our resident choir and I suspect rather less professionally trained. In front of where Diana and I were sitting, one of the tenors was obviously totally blind. He processed in and out with his hand on the shoulder of the chorister in front as a guide. His short solo piece proved him to have a lovely voice. However, the *piece de resistance* was my favourite anthem, "This is the Record of John" composed by my favourite English composer, *Orlando Gibbons*. It is a "verse anthem" and the three solo verses were sung by a very tall, very young and very black young man with a perfect, clear, light English tenor voice, the beauty of which moved me beyond telling.

A true Englishman

What is that makes an Englishman? Not skin colour. This chorister was the epitome of everything I regard and love as profoundly English. When I, a half Australian, thanked him afterwards he reacted, as do I when complimented on a sermon. His modesty though, as you would expect from a true Englishman, was totally and refreshingly unfeigned.

(563) “This and That” - 25 August 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Cloisters - Wells Cathedral

The cloisters of Wells Cathedral were built in the late 13th century. They are a delight to saunter through and are sometimes graced and occasionally disgraced by arty exhibitions of one sort or another.

Sleeping, twitching drunks

The cloisters of Harare Cathedral were completed in 1954. They provide a tranquil, shaded, lunch setting and seat for office workers desirous of quietude. I would sometimes encounter drunks sleeping and twitching in them on my way to the 6.30am daily Eucharist when, for three years, I was a young deacon and then priest at Harare Cathedral. A surprising number of these old boozers, when engaged in conversation, claimed once upon a time to have been a cathedral choirboy. It is an alcoholic's prosaic version of the poetic maste-rpieces of Wordsworth, Traherne and Vaughan that recall a golden and divine-glory infused childhood.

*Happy those early days! When I
Shined in my angel-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white, celestial thought....*

Henry Vaughan

Dazzling white corellas

The Church is no enemy of alcohol. Nor am I. Two of my Australian parishes contained notable wineries. At one of them, on a perfect day in early May, beneath the outstretched, benedictory branches of great gum trees, I blessed the new wine at *Best's Winery* in Great Western, a village in my parish. The vines were in splendid autumnal colour and a chorus of dazzling white corellas were reverentially silent as our parish choir sang, and derisively cacophonous while I spoke.

Every single day of my life in Ararat parish I blessed Best's wine. Not because I'm a boozy old wino with a pitted, strawberry-red nose, spidery network of broken veins all over my cheeks and trembling hands, but because I was the priest of a parish that celebrated a daily Eucharist. Every morning I made my way from devotions in the chapel to the altar, there a cruet of Best's fine fortified wine was poured into a silver and gold chalice and God's blessing and presence invited to reveal itself in and though it. In those days Best's Winery supplied Holy Trinity Church in Ararat with Communion wine and had done so for years. Their wine was accustomed to being blessed and consecrated to fortify, comfort, inspire and Christianise the faithful.

Draining the chalice

Harare's Cathedral was sited in the centre of a large and bustling capital city. Congregations were large and diverse. Odd bods and derros with rather too great a taste for wine would sometimes find their way to the altar rail. The Dean, a bearded, outspoken and volatile fellow, instructed me to administer the chalice in an economical way: “Hold it up hard against the upper lip, Andrew, that stops any greedy buggers from sucking the chalice dry.”

It is not only poverty-stricken drunks who pose this sort of problem. The first time that Lady Bagot, the wife of the Rev. Sidney Swann, MA (1862-1942), the Vicar of Lindfield, received Holy Communion

from her husband, she drained the wine to the dregs and commented, “Perfectly delicious, my dear!” and handed it back.

Skating on Thin Ice

Wine is dangerous, but then so is everything in life worthwhile, not least religion. Who would want too much safety and a life with no risks, no spice, no challenge? The fascinating old toper and wit Jeffrey Bernard once wrote: “skating on thin ice is a far better exercise than jogging.....” Indeed. How much more challenging to sail close to the wind at the risk of swamping, than to be wafted safely only where the wind takes you. There is risk involved in drinking, there is risk involved in religion. Both can intoxicate and turn you into an obsessed, unpleasant, self-destructive and dangerous fanatic. Fanatics, be they drunks or religious obsessives, are equally obnoxious.

Best's Best

When we blessed a local vineyard’s new vintage, on site, in Ararat parish, it was more than a promotional exercise or just a bit of fun. We were asking God to smile upon a product of which we were proud, that had been creatively laboured over, worked hard with and that had demanded expertise, skill and ingenuity in the attempt to make it the very best: Best's best wine. We believed it to be good and so brought it before God for his blessing, convinced that God's approval and blessing upon any endeavour is essential for long term benefit, fulfilment, happiness and contentment. To bless what is excellent and worthwhile is to ask God to make our relationship with it right, wholesome and healthy for its future good and ours.

Dangerous stuff

Best's Winery in those days retained, and I hope still does, the atmosphere, warmth and welcome that comes from remaining a family concern. The workers and proprietors were not in the business only and merely for profit. They endeavoured to produce good wine, the very best wine, for profit, certainly, but also because to do so is good in its own right. Profit was not the only driving force in the enterprise. Delight and justifiable pride in producing something worthwhile was a vital part of the undertaking as well. To bless the wine was to acknowledge and reinforce this.

A wild, witty, gregarious priest colleague once came to Ararat to buy Communion wine and I accompanied him to Best’s Winery. He proved to be a social sensation at the atmospheric sales and wine tasting bar. In minutes he was behind the bar jovially dispensing wine while quietly imbibing it himself. On his way home the police gave chase, so he put his foot down and managed to evade them, abandoning his car in the back streets of a small rural town to disappear on foot and hide in a friend’s house. The police, no fools, found him and he lost his licence for six months. Yes, wine is dangerous stuff, but well worth blessing.



Cloisters - Harare Cathedral

(562) “This and That” - 18 August 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Our garden in Wells - Somerset

There are a few American translations of the bible that tell us of what has to be the gloomiest bathroom in world literature.

The divine right of kings

With his army in the wilderness King Saul was searching for David in order to kill him. “....*At the place where the road passes some sheepfolds, Saul went into a cave to go to the bathroom, but as it happened, David and his men were hiding in the cave....*” David’s men urge him to kill Saul while “*he covered his feet*” (i.e. with his pants down). but David, a future king himself, shrewdly refused to violate the nascent doctrine of the *divine right of kings*. Saul was spared.

Gloomy bathrooms are favoured by the aged. On our way across Australia from Darwin on the north coast to the Great Australian Bight, Diana and I phoned ahead each day to book into a motel, once we were sure of where we would stop. We left

this a little late as we approached Alice Springs and so all the motels were full. We ended up in a suburban bed and breakfast home. Our hosts were disconcertingly attentive and extravagantly effusive, but it was the bathroom that dazzled us. It was large, brightly lit, glitteringly chromed, verdant with great pots of palms and rudely vigorous succulents and the walls were mirrored from floor to ceiling. No matter where you looked there you were, starkly nude and lit. Not a pretty sight. I envied Saul his cave and deeply sympathised with Queen Elizabeth I’s aversion to mirrors.

Enabling marital dalliance

There could well be a good reason for mirroring bathrooms from floor to ceiling though. Just as alcohol mercifully blurs reality for drunks unable to cope with life, so too, perhaps, does the inevitable build up of condensation on bathroom mirrors gently blur reality. Having glimpsed themselves only dimly in a misted mirror, the freshly showered are able to trot off to bed nursing sufficient illusions about themselves to drive away the demons of insecurity and self-hate, which might otherwise keep them awake, or render them incapable of marital dalliance.

The Wind in the Willows

Reality of another sort crept up on me in my first Australian rectory bathroom. Early one morning I was standing before the mirror brushing the remnants of once luxuriant locks, when I heard strange and unfamiliar footsteps, “*tk, tk, tk, tk....*” I looked round and a large rat strolled in. There was no towel over its shoulder or tablet of soap in its paw, leading me to suppose it to have no right to be there. I gave a great shout of horror. Not liking my tone of voice it decided to run for it, not out of the bathroom but straight past me towards a hole in the wall where a tile had fallen off. Foolishly it made a wrong turn and popped instead into the shower cubicle. I shut the door on it and it was trapped. Round and round it scampered looking for a way out, but there was none. I dispatched it with mixed feelings because of my deep affection for Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*.

The Lady of Shallott

Superstitions about mirrors abound. Understandably because to look into one reveals something rather more sinister and significant than just our horrifying self as we really are. Is it you who you see there, or is it your doppelgänger, a mysterious double? After all, the left hand of your reflection is actually your right hand, it isn’t quite you. Weird. Alice stepped through her mirror into an amazing world that is as sinister as entertaining. In the *Lady of Shallot’s* ‘mirror clear....’

*That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot....*

Disaster ensues when it reveals the enticing and bold Sir Lancelot, whose sight tempts the Lady from her weaving and so....

*The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.*

This is Tennyson's nod to the widespread superstition of broken mirrors being harbingers of bad luck.

Divination

In times past mirrors in sick rooms were commonly covered, as too in the presence of death and during thunderstorms. They were also commonly used in divination. St Paul might well be referring to this in his first letter to the Corinthians when he says: *"For we know in part, and we prophesy in part... for now we see through a glass, darkly....."*

In Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, we read:

*This mirour eek, that I have in myn hond,
Hath swich a myght that man may in it see
Whan there shall fallen any adversitee...*

According to many writers of old, including Bobbie Burns *"if a maiden stands with a candle before a mirror and eats an apple, then her future husband will appear to her in the mirror."* Mirrors were thought to reveal the future as well as the present.

There are other superstitions. The devil was thought sometimes to use them to look out at viewers. It was considered unwise to allow babies to look into a mirror before they were a year old, if they were to avoid a troubled life. Brides arrayed for their wedding were advised to avoid looking in a mirror for much the same reason. A woman who tied her night-cap before the looking-glass would die an old maid.

Asinine readers

Many years ago, when I edited a church paper with extravagant panache I would respond to those who criticised my efforts by telling them that the paper was but a mirror and if an ass peered into it, he couldn't expect an apostle to look out.



The River Wye

(561) “This and That” - 11 August 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Burrow Mump - Somerset Levels

The ability to pass a pretty compliment is a rewarding social asset. Diana is an excellent recipient of mine, she laughs at them. Rightly so, because they are usually exaggerated, ironic and offered in jest, though calculated to leave a slight aftertaste of genuine and heartfelt truth because “*many a true word is spoken in jest*”.

In wine and laughter, truth

She is a solicitous wife who at present is dripping antibiotic drops into my right eye every six hours and anti-rejection drops every two hours. She does this with the help of a little chart she’s made to ensure none is inadvertently missed.

Not at all dismayed at the lack of hair on my head, she lengthens her regular trims of my fine bald pate with painstaking scizzor assaults upon my ear and nose hairs. After these lengthy bouts of barbering I am likely to

say, ironically: “*What a fine little huss’f you are*”. It’s a phrase that deliberately recalls the submissive, dutiful housewives of 17th century puritans. Diana is anything but submissive or puritanical, hence her invariable chuckle or snort. However, she’s sensitive enough to the nuances of irony to be aware, I like to think, of the genuine appreciation that underlines the jest.

One of my doughty mother’s favourite aphorisms, usually quoted with a glass of wine in her hand and after saying something outrageous, was “*in vino veritas*” (*in wine truth*). She is right, wine does sometimes loosen inhibitions sufficient to allow unpalatable or unpopular truths to be said. From that aphorism James Joyce coined a new one that is even more dear to my heart: “*in risu veritas*” (*in laughter truth*). Truth has many shades, sides and aspects. Irony and its close cousin, humour, recognise and acknowledge this. Do Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un ever laugh, except in scorn, or smile instead of sneer, I wonder?

Meeting in Tufton Street

Last Monday we went to London to a meeting of the *St Helena Diocesan Association*. We meet in Faith House, Tufton Street, just behind Dean’s Yard in Westminster. We are a small group of folk dedicated to support the Bishop of the one diocese in the Anglican Communion I wouldn’t have minded being offered. I was its archdeacon for a year and a half, an honour, I like to joke, not dissimilar to being archdeacon of Nanky Poo. Though that’s a joke salted with irony, because the Diocese of St Helena, which consists of only four parishes, one of them 700 miles away on Ascension Island is to my mind almost ideal in size. Dioceses of no more than half a dozen parishes enable their bishops to be true pastors to their clergy and also to double as a parish Vicar, as is now the case on St Helena.

We travelled to London by bus, a three hour journey each way that is cheap, restful, and from the top deck offering views over walls into people’s gardens and over hedges into bountiful fields, as well as into ugly ones filled by solar panels.

Infrequent Mail

At Hammersmith Bus Station we took the tube to St James Park, walked to Westminster and then through Dean’s Yard to Tufton Street. This is a street that has been dear to my heart for over seventy years. It was once home to *The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*, which was the Missionary Society that sent us all off to Tristan da Cunha in 1956. Letters and parcels from there were part of the huge piles of post that arrived in bursting mailbags to be upended on our sitting room floor in the island’s

little vicarage. Mail arrived by ship four or five times a year. My father's minder and friend at Tufton Street was the Overseas Secretary, a kindly fellow priest, always referred to by my father and mother by his surname, Sulston.

The Bishop of St Helena

Present at the meeting last week was the bishop of St Helena, Dale Bowers and his wife Penny. St Helenian born they were both, as children, taught by Diana. Dale is a jovial, loquacious, capable and dedicated priest and bishop, Penny is the retired headmistress of the Island's secondary school. Also present were Nicola and Andrew McHugh, Nicola, in days gone by, had been involved in training nurses on both St Helena and Tristan da Cunha. Also present was my predecessor as Vicar of the Island's Cathedral in the nineteen eighties, Clay Knowles, as too was a previous Vicar of Ascension Island, Nicolas Turner. It was lovely to reminisce and hear first hand news of an Island that both Diana and I love, and upon which my daughter Elizabeth was born and my daughter Rachel conceived. As well as blessing me, the island also scarred me for I left my appendix there, as well as a good part of my heart.

Small islands are no more immune to change than large countries and great continents. It is emigration not immigration that troubles the Island today. When we were there in the 1980s the population was well over 6000, it has now dropped to about 4,300 and the birth rate to a mere 13 births in 2022 and 18 births in 2023. The young tend to leave to work in Britain, never to return except to visit.

Almond and Pastel de Nata tarts

After parting on the Island's wharf in 1985, Diana and I came back into each others lives at a meeting of the *St Helena Diocesan Association* at Newport in Wales. She had learned from my annual Christmas letter that I was coming to England in 2010 and thanks to our distinctive surname was able to contact my son to give him her phone number, should I care to ring her, which I did. I was staying with my son and wife in Sturminster Newton where they were then both curates. Diana and I agreed that she would travel by train to Gillingham, where I would pick her up and then, very early on the following day, we would drive in my son's car to the Newport meeting. After 25 years there was much to share, talk, commiserate and laugh about all the way to Wales and at Diana's suggestion we diverted to look over Wells Cathedral, my first ever visit. It was an early morning and heart-stopping visit. We pressed on to Axbridge where at the town's market we bought a rich, intensely almond tart each, delicious beyond telling. At the Severn Bridge Diana advised me to park as close as possible to the tolling booth to avoid having to get out of the car. Ever obedient I did so and smashed £420's worth of rear view mirror on my son's car. The meeting was fun. Seventeen, days later we were engaged and 3 months later married.

On the bus home from London last week we ate a couple of richly eggy Portuguese *Pastel de nata* tarts. They were as delicious at the Axbridge almond ones.



Burrow Mump - Somerset Levels

(560) “This and That” - 4 August 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



All Saints, Kingweston

Among the saddest lines in English literature is the wistful comment of the buffoonish Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: *"I was adored once too...."* So many, many of us can sadly say the same: *"I was adored once too...."*

It's a phrase that tells of love's fragility, impermanence and inevitable end. It recalls being abandoned by a beloved one, supplanted by someone else, or bereaved by death. *"I was adored once too...."*

Weeping for her children

In the Christmas story the saddest of sad lines is: *"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."* It tells of the vulnerability of children, and the impotence of mother love in the face of human hatred, violence, fear and anger. It reminds us of the millions of little ones

who have died and still do, by way of terrorism, war, pogrom or by poverty exacerbated disease: *"Rachel weeping for her children;"* refusing *"to be consoled, because they are no more."*

The most significant line in the Christmas story is Mary's acceptance of personal disaster: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* The story, as it has come down to us, shimmers with the wonder of divine reality illuminating and transfiguring ordinary reality: heavenly dreams, angels, wise men, guiding stars, celestial singing and ancient prophecies being fulfilled, all of which dull factualists deplore but the imaginative love.

But, but... at the story's heart is Mary faced with personal disaster, an unwanted, unlooked for, undeserved pregnancy and yet praying, not for shimmering signs or wonders, not to be spared her personal disaster, but instead praying her acceptance, "Yes!" "Yes!" Praying, not *"take this cup away from me Lord"*, but *"here am I.... let it be with me according to your word."*

"Yes" not "No"

It is the most significant line in the Gospel. Jesus embedded it in the only prayer he left for us, the Lord's Prayer and like Mary prayed it himself in Gethsemane. In the Lord's Prayer: *"Thy will be done"*. In Gethsemane: *"Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done"*. Acceptance, not resistance. "Yes" not "No".

All the glory, signs, wonders, beauties and miracles that so illuminate and halo the Christmas narratives are subsequent to and dependent upon Mary's acceptance of her personal disaster. "Yes" to social disgrace and possible abandonment by Joseph. Acceptance, not resistance. "Yes" not "No".

All the glory, signs, wonders, beauties and miracles that so illuminate and halo the Easter narratives, likewise, are subsequent to and dependent upon Jesus's acceptance of his personal disaster, his "Yes" to social humiliation, disgrace, brutal torture and a likely hideous death. Acceptance, not resistance. "Yes" not "No".

"Yes" not "No"

Acceptance: "Yes" not "No", lies at the heart of the Christian ethic, of the radical Sermon on the Mount ethic: *turn the other cheek, walk the second mile, love your enemy, if anyone sues you for your coat, give him your cloak as well.* Acceptance, not resistance. "Yes" not "No". Courage, not cowardice.

This shouldn't be dismissed as submissive fatalism. Acceptance opens the door to change, to new creative possibilities, to grace. Acceptance provides the nitty gritty substance to forgiveness. Mary's prayer, the Lord's Prayer, the Gethsemane Prayer and ideally our own prayer, are to do with acceptance, not avoidance: "Yes" not "No".

Unwanted pregnancy, judicial murder

According to Christian theology, God did not create the world in six days, and then step back and sleep forever. He continues to create. He holds in existence the world and everything in it, now: the sub atomic particle, molecule and amoeba, the rain-forests, Himalayas and satellites, your kitchen table, my little finger and your mind.

When we say yes to what happens, like Mary, when we accept and so can forgive, like Nelson Mandela, when like my first wife Margaret and so many others, we accept and say “Yes” to cancer, or injury, or misfortune, when we say “*Yes, Yes, Yes,*” we begin to work creatively with and shape what follows. Instead of whining “*no, no, no, let black be white, spare me, save me, let my will, my will, my will be done not yours....*” we say instead: “*Yes*”. To do so allows God, the continuing Creator, to work wonders in cooperation with us. An unwanted pregnancy enables God’s Incarnation. a judicial murder enables Jesus’s Resurrection.

If we refuse to bog ourselves down in the desire for unattainable proofs and certainties, if we refuse to hear the Gospel narratives and Christmas and Easter stories as mere historians, which we’re not, and instead say “Yes” to them, how illuminating it is. We are freed to love and revel in them, to look not sceptically for unattainable, factual certainty or proof, but imaginatively for beauty, truth and meaning.

Saying “Yes” to the music of what happens

The fundamental Christian narratives are unprovable and sometimes downright otherworldly and fanciful. They are a mixture of fact and fiction, as is all historical narrative, biography, and even autobiography. The Christmas and Easter stories contain what is closely remembered and partially remembered, what is interpreted and then shaped by later circumstances. At their heart, though, lies Mary’s incontrovertible “Yes” to a birth and Jesus’ incontrovertible “Yes” in Gethsemane to likely crucifixion.

I was adored once too

To say “Yes” to the music of what happens, be it happy or doleful, can transfigure what will happen. It enables God to work his wonders and flood our life and story, with the glory, signs, wonders and beauties that illuminate and halo the life-enhancing, purpose-imparting Christian Faith. ***I was adored once too....*** I still am.



From the Lady Chapel, Wells Cathedral

(559) “This and That” - 28 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Hagioscope or Squint - St Edward's Chilton Polden

Hospitals are alien places. Miles of wide, unwindowed corridors and double doors leading off to mysteriously named and numbered wards, mark them off as different from the space-saving, narrow meanness of most modern buildings. In the wards doctors, nurses and workers are from every part of the globe. Our English hospitals are the United Nations in microcosm. The nurses and sisters seem to peer into computer screens more than into patients' faces, though when nurses do approach a patient they are kindly, attentive and reassuring.

In Southampton Hospital

I have just spent two days and one night in hospital having sophisticated surgery on one of my eyes. I am now released into the care of the world's best nurse Diana. A damaged cornea had rendered conventional cataract procedures precarious and so instead, a piece of transplanted cornea, held in place by a bubble of gas destined to dissipate over six or so days, but to hold everything where it ought be in the meantime, should improve my sight enormously, so long as I spend all but ten minutes of every hour on my back for six days. It was a torrid procedure, but if successful worth it.

All this took place In Southampton hospital, where I had been on a waiting list for two years - may whoever donated the cornea rest in peace and rise in glory.

Ten years ago, almost to the day, I was in Southampton hospital for another ailment. It has taken me all of ten minutes to write the above and I must now go and lie supine once more, so what follows is the St John's Boldre pew-sheet write-up of my 2014 experience in Southampton hospital:

Feeling groggy out visiting

Two Mondays ago I was out visiting parishioners feeling very far from buoyant, only too happy to let Diana do the driving as well as most of the conversing. All was not well with me. The slightest exertion brought on grogginess and a shortness of breath. We returned home and discovered my pulse rate to be a mere thirty five beats a minute. A visit to the doctor and an ECG revealed full heart block. We headed straight to Southampton hospital's A & E where I was processed immediately, cheerfully and well. I was then stretchered off to the Cardiac Care Unit where I was only too happy to let the corner of a twelve bed ward become my refuge and home for five days. The air conditioner was out of commission and so it was hot.

Splendid nurses, odd bedfellows

Hospital wards are interesting places. This one was notable for splendid nurses and odd bedfellows. One of the nurses was a vivacious young Ndebele woman, delighted to discover that I had long and strong connections to Zimbabwe. She gave me a hug and kiss when I left, saying how lovely it had been to meet a fellow African and Christian and that I was like a father to her. All the nurses were efficient, solicitous and kind.

Five days residence made me the ward's longest stayer, so I witnessed the comings and goings of a fair turnover of patients, both men and women. Opposite me for a couple of nights was a great mountain of a man whose snores ripped the air violently apart throughout the night. They were the wet, gurgling, nasal snores of a lifelong smoker. It was only my back-lit Kindle and Diarmaid MacCulloch's great tome "The History of Christianity" that allowed me to suffer serenely rather than resentfully. The second most

notable of my fellow patients was a man who whistled from dawn until dusk. He did so tunefully and well, but relentlessly, breaking off only to eat, for his ablutions and to sing. I suffered this for my last two days in hospital, he was still there when I left. The insufferable was rendered sufferable once I had gathered that he was less egotistical than downright dilly. Not showing off at all, it was just his way of making sense of a puzzling world. To tell him to be quiet would have been cruel and I doubt if he would have been able to.

Lyme disease the culprit

The teams of registrars, consultants, specialists and trainees who came to see me were impressive. They seemed puzzled that I should have severe heart block with no pain or symptoms, other than a slight shortness of breath and grogginess when standing up. While I was sitting up in bed both my heart and self appeared in excellent condition, except for that slow pulse rate. One of the specialists then asked, as an afterthought, if I had recently been bitten by a tick. Indeed I had. They decided to test my blood for Lyme Disease, expecting nothing as results in their experience were always negative. To their surprise, and I think delight, they discovered Lyme Disease to be the culprit.

A mysterious disease Lyme Disease. Until I came to the New Forest I was unaware of it. A specialist on infectious diseases decided I should have a twenty one day course of a powerful intravenous antibiotic. This I am still undergoing, delivered at Lymington's fine hospital each morning. I also have a pacemaker tucked firmly into its little flesh pocket beneath a dressing that will hopefully be removed tomorrow. Unfortunately the somewhat gruelling though very interesting operation to insert the pacemaker had to be undergone twice, as one of the electrical leads did not embed quite firmly enough the first time. The operation is done with only local anaesthetics and I opted for no sedatives so as to appreciate fully what was going on, as indeed I did. Of all the tests that followed the operation the most fascinating was how, with the aid of an electronic device and a few leads attached to my body, specialists can fiddle with the heart's rate, zooming it well up into the hundreds and right down to the thirties in seconds.

Deo gratias

I am now home, full of vigour, denied a full, hot shower until tomorrow (because of the wound's dressing), not allowed to drive for six weeks, limited in the use of my right arm (until the pacemaker's leads are firmly settled in), with a cannula in my right arm for another couple of weeks, Lyme Disease in its death throes in my system (hopefully), a deeper awareness of and distaste for ticks, gratitude for the NHS and all its good servants, as well as to God, solicitous parishioners and a splendidly loving wife.



Wells Cathedral: High Altar and beyond

(558) “This and That” - 21 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



The Island of St Helena

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Digglefold Primary School and Guinea Fowl Boys High School in Rhodesia contained classroom desks with porcelain inkwells. These were in the right hand corner, beyond the desktop's hinges, a disadvantage to left-handers like me.

Blotting paper pellets

To the left of the inkwell was a runnel for pencils, crayons or dipping pens, to prevent them rolling off the desk. The underside of the hinged desktop contained rather more daring graffiti than the names and short messages inscribed on the top. What is more, if the desk had ever been that

of a talented fellow pupil and natural artist called Ujfalusi, there was likely to be a near perfect outline of a nude girl to admire.

During dull lessons the inkwells offered a variety of enjoyable diversions. Flies could be given an enforced dip in the inky blue waters of the well to emerge distressed, bedraggled and befuddled, but blotting paper provided less cruel and more daring fun. The ceilings of classrooms were spotted with blue blotches from ink-soaked pellets whizzed upwards with the help of a flexible ruler, and the back of the jacket worn by Taffy Evans, our science teacher, was similarly blotched by the more courageous of pellet-flicking pupils, whenever he turned to write on the blackboard.

Speech recognition

Far too young to remember quill pens I do recall using dipping pens, with removable nibs of different thicknesses. These soon gave way to Osmiroid, Parker, or Platignum fountain pens which, because they needed to be filled periodically, still left the middle finger of my left hand with a near permanent, blue-stained pressure depression above the nail. Once I left school that blue stain became an orangey-yellow, nicotine derived one, cigarettes being held between the same two fingers of my left hand.

These observations and recollections arise from the need to digitalise the crabbed, closely-packed fountain pen and longhand written lines of my St Helena journals. I hardly ever touch a pen, biro or pencil these days and can type as fast as I can think, but copy-typing such closely packed lines is difficult. When I take my eyes from the journal to glance at the screen I lose my place and it takes ages to find it again. The answer is “speech recognition”. I now read my journal into a microphone, a day's entry at a time, and it appears on the screen with surprisingly few serious errors, though a thorough, corrective proofread is required for each entry once transcribed. What a useful tool “speech recognition” is and how far removed from the inky, scratchy pens and nibs of my youth. The journals remind me that we left Cape Town at 4.00pm on 12 August 1982, after being stranded there for 3 months because the ship upon which my wife Margaret, two boys Peter and David and self were booked, had been requisitioned for use in the Falklands war.

13 August 1982 Friday: I am lying on the top bunk of cabin number 4 of the *M V Aragonite*. The port hole is wide open and the fan whirring because the innards of the ship are warm. It is 9.00pm, David sleeps beneath me, Margaret and Peter are next door. The ship rises and falls in a heavy swell. We left Cape Town at 4.00pm yesterday and the friends who saw us off were horrified at the smallness of the ship. Its gross tonnage is 698 and it was custom built in Glasgow, 20 or more years ago, to transport explosives for ICI over the North Sea. There is no lounge, no bathroom, a single shower for male and female passengers and the crew's washing sink suffices as a bath for the two boys. Customs and Immigration procedures were held in the hot little dining room and were perfunctory, though I was taken to task for being in South Africa illegally for two months, albeit involuntarily, and told that this could prove a problem next time I enter South Africa.

14 August 1982 Saturday: A lovely day, though the heavy swell does well and truly rock this little 164 foot long vessel. I stood up in the bow for a while this afternoon and found myself almost enjoying the movement. One large albatross was in majestic, sea-skimming attendance, as were four black faced gulls. We had drinks at 12 noon in the Captain's cabin, all 12 passengers squeezed in, and I enjoyed a couple of beers. The small galley provides excellent and fresh food, tonight fillet steak with chips, broccoli and mushrooms, preceded by a grapefruit cocktail and succeeded by apple pie. I played scrabble with a bossy nursing sister and won.

16 August 1982 Monday: We are still managing to evade serious sea-sickness. There's a heavy swell and a twenty to twenty five knot wind from the stern..... As is always the case the sea, when well away from land, is almost totally devoid of interest. Looked down upon from above it is dark blue to black in colour, implacable and malevolent seeming. The hissing of spray brings no delightful scent with it (we're only five or six feet from the water on the fore and aft decks) and the sea air is more notable and noticeable for its obvious ability to rust than for tickling the senses with aromatic delight. Cups and glasses slide off tables periodically and the steward, Michael, waters the table cloth before each meal to help prevent this. We eat at the first sitting, often with two particularly pleasant officers, one of them the diminutive, Scottish Chief Engineer. It is now calculated that we'll arrive at about 6.30am on Thursday 19 August after a mere 6½ days.

Settled in the Vicarage

25 August 1982 Wednesday: I am in the Cathedral at an altitude of 1,700 feet on a cool morning and have just said Matins with the Bishop as the musical calls of little ground doves articulated the Holy Spirit's presence. We approached the island before light on Thursday, bleary-eyed from a party on the ship's stern deck the night before, sampling "Plo" for the first time - a St Helenian curry that is a spicy jumble of everything. We were woken by shouts and footsteps to see, off the port side and ahead, a dark blackness with a single green light on it, St Helena. We passed into the lee, leaving the Atlantic swell to break on the rocks, caves and wild stone beaches of the island's southern side. It had pushed us along at almost 12 knots, lifting the screw so high in the water the vibrations had threatened the old engine, forcing us to slow down. As light dawned, porpoises leapt alongside us and frolicked, rolled and dived in the ship's bow wave. Once anchored we had a quick breakfast and at about 8.00am a tender approached with one of its passengers in a purple shirt. It was a dapper bishop coming to welcome us, Ted Cannan, and as bishops go, one of the best. There was desultory chat until we were directed to collect all our stuff from the cabins whereupon, with our fellow passengers, we clambered into the tender, along with Margaret's precious sewing machine, and made our way over a placid sea to the island's wharf.

The world's edge



St Paul's Cathedral Vicarage, St Helena 1983

Our Rectory is a large, rambling house in a verdant, sylvan setting, damply and lusciously green. Its higher altitude climate is bracing and fresh compared to Jamestown. We are well settled and once our stuff arrives should be comfortable. It is a beautiful island, redolent with history, mystery and strangeness. To begin the 1,700 feet drop down the cliffs to Jamestown, when the weather has blurred the horizon so that sea and sky are one, is like approaching the very edge of the world with nothing beyond this island save boundless sky.

(557) “This and That” - 14 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



St Andrew's Cathedral - Lady Chapel

A dull game to watch is soccer, but totally engrossing. The frustrating infrequency of goals is offset by the frequency of missed, edge-of-the-seat opportunities. It's a case of the '*stop it, I like it*' paradox. For as long as two whole hours spectators endure wave after wave of breathless, numb-bummed suspense and unrealised expectancy. Far too often the attenuated torture of 120 goalless or near goalless minutes culminates in the hugely unsatisfactory, arbitrary, nail-biting, anti-climactic climax of a penalty shoot out.

A frisson of delight

How many of the millions who watch football, I wonder, delight in that simple gesture made by some superstar players before they take a penalty, or before they are unleashed onto the pitch as a substitute, the *sign or the cross*? I do. I love to see it. There is an instant frisson of recognition.

“He's one of us” I think to myself, “he's a fellow Christian, may he prosper.” I love him for it.

It is the same when I read a poem and come across a stanza, or just a single line, that appears to reveal the poet to be on the side of the angels, a fair dinkum Christian. Again there's that frisson of delighted recognition and fellow feeling. “He is one of us, part of the family” I think to myself, “a fellow Christian”, I love him for that.

Straying angels

Like the simple '*sign of the cross*' gesture, a single line of verse can give the game away and reveal a poet to be more than a wordsmith and fellow human being. It can reveal him to be as well a member of the family, one of the loving and forgiving community of the faithful, a disciple of the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth, someone who finds wisdom in the “foolishness of God”.

The last line of the second stanza of a poem by Patrick Kavanagh did this for me when I read it recently, here are the first two stanzas of **In Memory of My Mother**

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay

Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see

You walking down a lane among the poplars

On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday —

You meet me and you say:

'Don't forget to see about the cattle —'

Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

That last line is lovely: “Among your earthiest words the angels stray”.

Total immersion

As the years roll on, simply to be a Christian seems more and more to be a lovely privilege. It's not a case of an elderly person “cramming for finals”, as one of my university lecturers and friends used to claim. Fear of divine judgement has never played a significant part in my theology or faith and when it comes to the pros and cons of an ‘afterlife’, I'm almost agnostic, am content simply to trust the God I've grown to believe in and love to bless me, and us all, with whatever is for our best. No, it has nothing to do with “cramming for finals”, something else is going on.

A few days ago, as is frequently the case, I sat in one of the stone-canopied, tapestry-backed and cushioned stalls of the Cathedral Quire waiting for choral Evensong to begin. Simply to be seated in such a place is to be blessed with a quietude and peace that passes all understanding. In the back row, the elaborately carved stone canopies of the stalls rest on slender columns of Purbeck marble that are deliciously and crisply cold to clasp and hold. The eyes soar upwards to architectural perfection, gothic arch upon arch pointing to a lovely ceiling. The organ footles and tootles away, tickling the ear, promising greater aural delight to follow. Once the harsh ring of the quarter hour is kicked by the medieval clock's "Quarter Jack", in glides the virger, holding out his virge like a wand, as he leads in the procession of choir and clergy. Once in their pews they face east, bow and the first words are sung not spoken: *O Lord open thou our lips....* So begins immersion in the purest of pure forms of worship.



St Andrew's Cathedral - Quire Stalls

Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks

On this particular occasion the choir was from Virginia in the USA. The Cathedral choir is now on its extended summer holiday until the beginning of the autumn school term. Visiting choirs enjoy the privilege of providing music in a lovely cathedral, with any gaps filled by the fine, local Cathedral Chamber Choir.

The psalms on the weekday of which I write were the closely related number 42 and 43, beautifully and expressively sung. Psalm 42 begins: *Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God : when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?*

Those words are dear to me for I do long for God and for a God-illuminated and God-enlightened world and existence. I refuse to countenance a Godless world, hence my delight to discover and encounter others, similarly fascinated and inspired by Jesus of Nazareth and who, like me, see love, sacrifice, service, forgiveness, mercy and the fulfilment and joy that arise from these virtues, as the whole point and goal of human existence. *My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God*, and what is more I love to *appear before the presence of God?* I'm a worship and God junkie.

A chaotic mosaic

Every morning we say Matins and celebrate the Eucharist in the Cathedral's octagonal Lady Chapel. Four of its five great windows are filled with a chaotic mosaic of broken shards, fragments and splinters of stained glass. The original windows were so thoroughly shattered by puritanical zealots in the seventeenth century, they could only be reassembled as non-representational collages of colour. To gaze at them as the sun rises each morning is to gaze into a chaos that isn't quite total, that like our colourful but chaotic world offers hints and glimpses of something other, of possible order, sense and meaning. Against the odds there are shards and pieces that are representative of the reality that once upon a time was depicted in realistic detail. Here and there is a recognisable face and beyond and behind it all are silhouettes not of angels but of jackdaws and pigeons rising and falling and telling of a life and world beyond the here and now. God has a way with chaos.



Wells Cathedral - Lady Chapel window

(556) “This and That” - 6 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



St Andrew's Cathedral - early morning

The largest bumble bees in the world occur in Chile. They can be more than an inch and a half long and are known locally as “flying mice”.

Cuckoo bumblebees

There are more than 250 members of the bumble bee species worldwide, most of them, though not quite all, are native to the Northern Hemisphere at higher altitudes and higher latitudes. Fuzzy, furry, humming balls of busyness, they are hugely attractive and invaluable pollinators. Capable of stinging us, they rarely do so, unless seriously provoked. Female, nest-making bumblebees can be distinguished from parasitic cuckoo bumblebees by

the hair-fringed pollen baskets on their back legs which are absent on cuckoo bumblebees.

The original English term for bumblebee was ‘humblebee’, though both terms have a pedigree that goes back to the middle ages. In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* it is humble bees, not bumblebees, and likewise in Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species*. Only from the beginning of the twentieth century did the term humble bee give way completely to the term bumble bee, due in part to the popularity of Beatrix Potter who, in the *Tale of Miss Tittlemouse*, introduces us to Babbity Bumble, the bumble bee.

Johann Nepomuk Hummel

The German word for bumblebee is ‘hummel’, an onomatopoeic word from which the English term “humble bee” appears to derive. It has nothing whatsoever to do with humility. Hummel is also a German surname and as I tap away on these matters entomological, I listen with delight to a five-hour play-list of Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s chamber music. Born in Austria (1778–1837), he was a child prodigy pupil of Mozart, Salieri and Haydn. In adulthood he was a friend of Beethoven and Schubert.

There is another Hummel affecting life in our Somerset home at present: Arvid David Hummel (1778-1836). He is an exact contemporary of the composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel, but Swedish not Austrian, an entomologist not a composer and the first to describe and identify *Tineola bisselliella*, the common “clothes moth”.

At this time of the year, no matter how absorbed I am in cooking, reading a good book, watching a television program, or listening to a piano trio by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, I am likely to be startled by a loud cry from Diana: “There’s one, there’s one. Get it, get it!” Her wish being my command, I leap up to obliterate in mid air, with a clap of my hands, a fluttering and all but invisible *tineola bisselliella*. Sometimes they are spotted stationary, perched peacefully upside down on the ceiling, whereupon, being taller than Diana, I’m called upon to squash them from tiny living moth to ceiling smudge.

It is not the moths that damage our carpets and clothes though, their mouths are atrophied. Their brief, aerial life of 15 to 30 days is preoccupied only by mating, egg laying and dying. It’s the white, near microscopic caterpillar hatchlings who wreak quiet havoc for anything from a month to two years, depending on conditions. They have a taste for keratin proteins and will munch through linen, wool, silk, cotton, cashmere, furs and even synthetic fibres if they’re blended with wool. With a particular fondness for sweat and dirt marinated clothes and fabrics they are insatiable, omnivorous blighters, partial to hair, feathers, grain, dried milk products, rice, bran and wheat flour as well as carpets and clothes. We are vacuuming, shifting furniture, lifting carpets and eradicating them as best we can.

A wandering Aramean

Long settled in the “promised land”, Jewish farmers, on bringing the first fruits of their harvest to the temple, would look back to their nomadic past and quote the Deuteronomist: “*a wandering Aramean was my father....*”. It was “*a wandering Neaum*” who was mine, he bequeathed me a taste for nomadic existence, a delight in moving on. Two substantial English vicarages by the time I was six, then three and a half years in an insubstantial and tiny one on remote Tristan da Cunha. Then there were two successive



Bishops Palace Moat, Wells

homes in the African bush for eight years, the second built by ourselves with local help. There followed a suburban home in Harare for six years and then a house in Chiswick and a bedsitter in South Kensington for a year and a half. Next came two and a half years at a theological college in South Africa and, once ordained, an apartment in central Harare for three years. This was followed by a rectory in Kadoma for four years and two and a half in the most capacious and loveliest of all my vicarage abodes on the island of St Helena. There followed four years in a rural Australian village rectory, six years, then eight years and then eleven years in the rectories of three successive Australian country towns.

Partial retirement brought me back to England for ten blissful years in a fine New Forest vicarage until now, finally and at last it is stasis, full stop. I've come to rest and gather moss in Somerset. My next move will be into

Eternity's vestibule, the six-foot long, wooden box that marks the beginning of the most mysterious and exciting journey of all. A wandering Aramean of a Neaum indeed.

All of which doesn't mean that the opposite to nomadism, a settled life lived all in one place, doesn't appeal as well. I have long loved a simple poem by the peg-legged, hobo poet W H Davies, of whom one miserable, thin-gutted critic has said: "his moon is bright, his sheep are white, his lambs are woolly, his fields green, his horses dumb, and with 'pretty,' 'fair,' 'sweet,' 'sad,' 'hard' and 'soft' one is almost half-way through his vocabulary..."

Like Mozart, able to order and distil from the limited notes of a simple D major scale a heart-stoppingly, beautiful melody, so too can W H Davies from a simple vocabulary:

Sweet Stay-at-Home

*Sweet Stay-at-Home, sweet Well-content,
Thou knowest of no strange continent;
Thou hast not felt thy bosom keep
A gentle motion with the deep;
Thou hast not sailed in Indian seas,
Where scent comes forth in every breeze.
Thou hast not seen the rich grape grow
For miles, as far as eyes can go:
Thou hast not seen a summer's night
When maids could sew by a worm's light;
Nor the North Sea in spring send out
Bright hues that like birds flit about
In solid cages of white ice —
Sweet Stay-at-Home, sweet Love-one-place,
Thou hast not seen black fingers pick*

*White cotton when the bloom is thick,
Nor heard black throats in harmony;
Nor hast thou sat on stones that lie
Flat on the earth, that once did rise
To hide proud kings from common eyes.
Thou hast not seen plains full of bloom
Where green things had such little room
They pleased the eye like fairer flowers —
Sweet Stay-at-Home, all these long hours.
Sweet Well-content, sweet Love-one-place,
Sweet, simple maid, bless thy dear face;
For thou hast made more homely stuff
Nurture thy gentle self enough;
I love thee for a heart that's kind —
Not for the knowledge in thy mind.*

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