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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (March 2014)



*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **March 2014** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website: <http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

(31) “This and That” - Sunday 30 March, 2014

It is easy for us to wax sentimental on Mothering Sunday. Especially if we were blessed with a loving mother.

Years ago I came across a purportedly medieval poem that bowled me over. A little research reveals it to be not medieval at all, but by a Frenchman born in 1849, Jean Richepin.

Much set to music as “*The Ballad of the Speaking Heart*”, it has been called by one fastidious reviewer “a ghastly, blood-boltered chanson”! I disagree and consider it to be a wonderful illustration of mother-love for Mothering Sunday. Youngsters might find it a bit frightening, though for those brought up, as I was, on Grimm's Fairy Tales, it will

cause no alarm at all. The poem needs reading aloud with a slight pause before its devastating final line:

Ballad of the Speaking Heart

*A poor lad once and a lad so trim,
Gave his heart to her who loved not him;
Said she, "bring me tonight, you rogue,
Your mother's heart to feed my dog."*

*To his mother's house went that young man,
Killed her, and took her heart, and ran.
But as he was running, look you, he fell,
And the heart rolled out on the ground as well*

*And the lad, as the heart was a-rolling, heard
That the heart was speaking and this was the word
The heart was a-weeping, and crying so small:
"Are you hurt, my child, are you hurt at all?"*

That is mother love for you, total, absolute, unconditional, heart-rending.

Antihero as hero

On Monday nights there is a new series of the comedy "Rev" on BBC Two. I enjoy it hugely. The first episode of the new series lived up to my expectations.

It is about a diminutive Church of England Vicar called Alan Smallbone and is unusual for not portraying him as a buffoon. He is comical yes, fallible yes indeed, vulnerable very much so, but essentially it is an affectionate, sympathetic portrayal. He is a very human but also impulsive, sometimes swearing, sex-ruminating, questioning, doubting and lovable Vicar of an inner London parish. He has only a dozen, broken folk in his congregation and there is almost no conventional "success" in his professional life at all. This, I suspect, is a characteristic of Anglicanism at its most authentic. I love Father Adam Smallbone. The anti-hero is my hero.

A sacramentalist

I am a "sacramentalist". Not because I consider the Church's sacraments always to be necessary for salvation, but rather because in my experience and life God is apprehended and known through the bread and wine of ordinariness rather than the flash bang wallop of extraordinariness and miracle. Hence my love of the following poem by Alice Meynell. Its occasion was the extreme anti-Church and anti-clerical actions of the republican regime in Portugal at the beginning of the last century:

In Portugal, 1912

*And will they cast the altars down,
Scatter the chalice, crush the bread?
In field, in village, and in town
He hides an unregarded head;*

*Waits in the corn-lands far and near,
Bright in His sun, dark in His frost,
Sweet in the vine, ripe in the ear -
Lonely unconsecrated Host.*

*In ambush at the merry board
The Victim lurks unsacrificed;
The mill conceals the harvest's Lord,
The wine-press holds the unbidden Christ.*

(30) "This and That" - Sunday 23 March, 2014

The first flock I ever tended was feathered. Ten thousand leghorn chickens on a Rhodesian farm. For the three month long summer vacation as a university student I worked on a farm about fifty miles from Harare. I slept in a hot little outhouse which I shared with two shuddering, wheezing refrigerators. From their badly sealed doors trickled a slow line of blood that puddled on the floor. They were packed tight with chicken carcasses for market.

Murderous folk song

Farming in Rhodesia was labour intensive. This farm had its own substantial village. Because the farmer was rather less than enlightened it was ramshackle and peopled, for the most part, by wild-eyed and feckless folk. I got to know a group of about twenty of its menfolk fairly well because I was their foreman in the potato fields. Bloodshot of eye, beer-brawl scarred and coarse of humour they reminded me of the grotesquely featured crowds depicted in some of Hieronymous Bosch's paintings. They sang over and over again a monotonous little song as they worked:

*Uya, uya, uya pano uya.
Iwe, iwe, mena blalla iwe!*

"Come, come, come here, come. You, you, I kill you!" Not the art of the folk song at its most inspiring, but I grew to be very fond of those wild men. It is a period of my life that has stood me in good stead in parish ministry because most of my priestly life has been spent in country parishes and since that time farming has always fascinated me.

The leghorns laid far better if given a little privacy. One of my jobs was nailing hessian curtains on to hundreds of wooden laying boxes, while four inches from my face a fluff-fringed backside blew kisses at me and then spat out a shining, wet, beautiful egg. A comical perspective on the miracle of birth. Early each morning I would collect from the deep-litter runs half a dozen chickens that had been pecked to death. Any chicken that was different, or in the wrong place, was idly pecked to death on its perch and just as idly allowed itself to be so.

Potatoes, like Englishmen, are susceptible to sunburn. If left uncovered for long in the field they blister. When stored the blisters burst, fester and begin to rot, emitting a smell that is as evil as any I have ever gagged over.

For a time I had a fellow worker who was an ex-mercenary in the Congo. He was full of blood thirsty tales and as if to underline them ate chunks of raw steak for his morning and afternoon tea-break. The farmer himself was a pleasant enough man but extremely neurotic. He was a bit of a health-food fanatic and long before the days of commercial yoghurt was a devoted consumer of the natural product, made by himself in chipped cups. The yoghurt had a slightly furred top and was delicious.

We got up at dawn, worked for about four hours and then had a splendid breakfast at half past nine, fresh fruit smothered in yoghurt, a couple of eggs, bacon and toast galore. The best meal of the day.

Neuroses

The farmer calmed his nerves by building, over many years, a beautifully crafted ocean going yacht, hundreds and hundreds of miles from the sea in a land-locked country. His neuroses were fed by farming's perennial uncertainty and also by the fact that in farming there is always more to do than can ever be done. This last problem is common to other vocations, not least parish priesting. As for a farmer there are always fences to be re-posted and acres of trees to be planted that never are, so for the parish priest there are always more people unvisited than visited, programmes and schemes to be undertaken that never are and so on. It all too easily leads to depression and dissatisfaction. It is a problem for which I have now found the answer. Three days a week "House for Duty" priesting. Alleluia.

(29) "This and That" - Sunday 16 March, 2014

On Easter Day, back in 2012, I wrote in my Australian pew sheet and later uploaded on to my web page: *I have a mind full of fragments. Most of them inconsequential, redundant, past their use-by date, bizarre, unutterably irrelevant to life today and downright daft. Odds and bobs of this, that and the other: snatches of songs learned at school, some of them bawdy some not, lines of poems, punch lines from jokes, my mother's favourite proverbs, my father's bon mots and so on.*

There's another little room to let

So it is that whenever I return from the cemetery after a funeral, I find myself singing a verse from a song with the recurring refrain: "There's another little room to let." It is humorous but not inappropriate to the circumstances because of its faint underlying trace of melancholy. It comes from a song that I have always presumed to have been sung by George Formby, but I cannot find it anywhere. My father used to sing it, and the one verse I can remember goes:

*Now a chap I know went fishing once
In a boat that was so thin.
He discovered a hole in the side of the boat
And the water it rushed in.
To stop the water rushing in
He did his best you bet.
He made another hole for to let it out,
And there's another little room to let.*

If anyone knows the song and can provide me with more verses I will be extremely grateful. You Tube provides no help.

Last week I received an email from a friendly stranger called Hayley: *My husband was just talking about a song his grandfather used to sing. The only reference to it on the internet was your blog. We got to talking about "My Grandfather's Clock". I did a search on You Tube and there is a recording from 1917 of both songs. Search for "George formby snr - my grandfathers clock". God bless.*

She is right I now have listened to the full song, with great pleasure. Such is the power, usefulness and unutterable delight of the Internet. Like all good things it has its evil flip-side: pornography, trash and scams, but as a source of knowledge, information, beauty and delight it is unparalleled. Most of the old songs we listened to when young can be called up and listened to again, fragments of old poems can be placed back into their full context, spellings, pronunciations and quotations can be checked and so on and so on. It has enriched my life enormously. I love it.

The Nimbleness of God

The poet Roy Campbell was a swashbuckling, larger than life South African. Unlike most of the artistic intelligentsia of his day he supported Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War. He was an earthy, passionate, man's man of a poet and an accomplished satirist. A thoroughgoing Christian, his translation of the poems of St. John of the Cross are considered by many to be unsurpassed. I particularly love his clever little poem, "*The Theology of Bongwi the Baboon*". It is not satire, but rather a quirky, inclusive take on Incarnation:

*This is the wisdom of the Ape
Who yelps beneath the Moon -
'Tis God who made me in His shape
He is a Great Baboon.
'Tis He who tilts the moon askew
And fans the forest trees,
The heavens which are broad and blue
Provide Him His trapeze;
He swings with tail divinely bent
Around those azure bars
And munches to his Soul's content
The kernels of the stars;
And when I die, His loving care
Will raise me from the sod
To learn the perfect Mischief there,
The Nimbleness of God.*

(28) "This and That" - Sunday 9 March, 2014

I have always had a soft spot for pigs. My father liked to have at least one near his vicarage to fatten and eat. He slaughtered, butchered, cured and smoked them himself.

In my first Australian parish I was asked to help a parishioner slaughter two pigs for the price of a haunch. He made a risible mess of the second animal, ending up with his arms about its neck, rolling in the muck as he tried to put his stun gun to its forehead. We scalded and de-haired the carcasses in an old bath of hot water with a wood fire underneath it. The pork was delicious.



The Parson and his Pig -Tristan da Cunha

Coalbiters

Pigs are attractive, comical animals and clean. If you allow them enough space in their sties they will never lie down in their own muck, which is more than can be said for donkeys, horses and cows. When a boy I discovered that they have a taste for lumps of coal. Throw into a pigsty a nog of clean black coal and it will be crunched and crackled down with relish, like a lump of butterscotch.

The pig in ancient Palestine was the domestic animal only of non-Jews and bad Jews. To the practising Jew pigs were unclean. Jews would no sooner eat or sacrifice one than they would a dog. Why pigs came to be condemned in the Law as unclean is unclear. Most of the nations round about had no scruples about eating them. Among the Babylonians the meat was sacred to various gods, and could be eaten at certain feasts. Among the Syrians it was sacred to the god Tammuz. Among the Egyptians the meat was usually taboo, but could be eaten on certain special occasions. Among the Greeks it was the most sacrificed of all animals.

Perhaps the Jewish Law rejected the pig just because of this. Rejection expressed a revulsion from the habits of the nations round about and a determination to be different..

Biblical pigs

Unsurprisingly the references in the bible to pigs are not usually complimentary. The wild pig is mentioned for its destructiveness. They apparently still exist in Palestine just because few people will hunt them to eat. In the Book of Proverbs there is the striking image of a beautiful woman without discretion being like a golden ring in a pig's snout.

In Jesus' parable "The Prodigal Son", the younger brother is reduced to becoming a keeper of pigs, extreme degradation for a Jew. There is also in the New Testament the strange story of the man "Legion" possessed by demons. When he is healed by Jesus the demons take possession of a herd of pigs and the pigs gallop over a cliff to their destruction in the sea.

My favourite reference is in St Matthew's Gospel. There Jesus tells us that pearls are best not thrown to swine. Too often the beauty of the Gospel is offered to those who, like pigs with pearls, have not the slightest inclination, capacity or will to appreciate or respond appropriately.

Because I am fond of pigs and so naturally feel guilty about my love of pork, with sage and onion stuffing, I leave these piggy ruminations on a complimentary note with the famous Irish ditty that goes:

*It was an evening in November, as I very well remember,
I was strolling down the street in drunken pride,
But my knees were all aflutter, and I landed in the gutter
And a pig came up and lay down by my side.*

*Yes I lay there in the gutter thinking thoughts I could not utter
When a colleen passing by did softly say:
"Ye can tell a man that boozes by the company he chooses..."
And the pig got up and walked away.*

(27) "This and That" - Sunday 3 March, 2014

It is refreshing for a parson to encounter a robust sinner, someone prepared to shoulder the blame for his weaknesses, misdemeanours or faults. Such folk are rare. Nearly everyone offloads blame on to others. It is sickening.

The honest beggar

A feckless seeming fellow came to my Australian vicarage once to ask for a sizeable amount of money for a long train fare. I said to him, "as luck would have it I need a patch of ground turned over to make a vegetable patch. I will give you the going rate for an hour or two of hard work. It will pay your fare." He agreed quite happily to this arrangement.

I watched him through the vicarage window. It was a hot day and the ground was hard. He picked up my pick and had a go. His picking soon diminished to mere pecking. After ten minutes he paused, tried again with little enthusiasm, paused once more to light a cigarette and then threw the pick down. A few moments later the doorbell rang. He said "It's no good Sir, it is always the bloody same. I'm useless. I start something but then can't be bothered to finish it. It is the story of my life. Here's your pick and shovel."

His honesty moved me. He did not blame me, the ground, the pick, his parents, God or the government. He blamed himself. He got his fare.

Self control

Among more conventionally respectable citizens the accepting of blame is becoming harder to find. If we have emphysema or lung cancer we are encouraged to blame the tobacco companies and advertisers rather than our pathetic inability to control ourselves and give up smoking. If we are obese we are encouraged to blame food manufacturers and the sugar industry, not our own pathetic inability to control our greed. If we are sexually incontinent or unfaithful to our spouse we are encouraged to blame our family background or our parents or our paramour rather than our own pathetic lack of self control.

Our world has given up on self control. We are encouraged to do what we like. If the consequences are nasty it is always someone else's fault.

The season of Lent encourages us to swim against the tide and practise self control. It is against the spirit of the age and is all the better for that.

Beer for breakfast

Ideally we give up something we really love, something that is good, not bad, something we will find difficult to give up, something to really test us and prove us.

I always, for a start, give up booze. Not because I think it bad or evil, because it isn't. Booze, properly handled and controlled is a glorious gift from God. I love it. It enhances my life, adds sparkle and fun to good company, aids relaxation and lifts celebrations to great heights. Just because of that it is easy to let out of control. So for forty days and nights I resist the stuff and control myself. Then, joy of joys, I can deeply appreciate it for the lovely and good gift that it is with a beer for breakfast on Easter Day!

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday on March 5. Let's resolve to take up good deeds: a worthwhile book, a study group, a new charity, helping someone in need, forgiving an enemy and so on. But also let's give up something good and that we love. To do so will help teach us self control as well as enhance our appreciation of one of God's good gifts, when once we come back to it at Easter.

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