

Home

BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (April 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 **April 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>*

(35) “This and That” - 27 April, 2014

Why do vicars of the Church of England have the highest job-satisfaction of anyone in the land? Our Church is supposedly in terminal decline. Atheists from academe blow contemptuous raspberries at us all the time. The media catalogue our failures, shortcomings and falls from grace with unmitigated glee. Yet a study based on figures drawn from data from the Office for National Statistics has found that, of all employees in our kingdom, those who report the greatest job satisfaction are vicars.

Is it because the varied, fallible, rag tag and bobtail collection of Christian saints and sinners that comprise the usual Church of England congregation are such good company? It could be. Certainly churchgoing folk are very much to my taste. The

generous sprinkling of rogues, sinners and scallywags among them are essential salt and pepper to counter, challenge and balance any tendency to goody-goodness, priggery or self-righteousness.

Life the bitch

Or is it more because we parsons, in being at the centre of what is a truly loving, accepting and forgiving community, have something of immeasurable worth to commend to others? It could be. Nearly everyone, just a millimetre beneath the surface, is unhappy or anxious in some debilitating way. Life, as so many of our great existential novelists and artists have pointed out, is absurd, sad and a bitch.

*Alas, how easily things go wrong
A sigh too many or a kiss too long
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain
And things are never the same again.*

Yet once we cut through Christian dogma, doctrine, hypocrisy, mumbo jumbo and superficial clap trap to arrive at our Faith's essence, in order to commend it to others, we offer a profoundly simple and yet satisfactory answer to the riddle of human existence. "Why do we exist?" Answer: "We exist simply to learn to love. To die to self and selfishness and learn to love." A love best summarised by a Cross. It is so simple, so true, so lovely.

Splendid

Or is it more because to be a parish priest is more than usually varied, creative, challenging and stimulating? Possibly. Regular visits to elderly folk who courageously manage still to love and smile in tribulation is hugely rewarding. To be expected, encouraged and even paid to sit regularly in some lovely corner of an ancient parish church to think, pray, read George Herbert's or Elizabeth Jennings' verse, or to listen to one of Bach's sacred cantatas, before celebrating Love in the Eucharist, is a privilege of privileges. To listen to the bereaved tell of their love of a lost one with affection and joy around a kitchen table, is profoundly moving. To compose irreverent articles, pieces of verse and nonsense for a pew sheet that people deign actually to read, is to be highly honoured. To wrestle with scripture, truth and difficult questions in sermons that people listen to and comment on, is a privileged invitation to be creative and imaginative. To discuss music with an excellent organist and choirmaster, is a joy beyond telling. To attempt to impart the rudiments of faith to lively confirmation kids who are honest, funny and reverently irreverent, is a delight. To sit on the chancel step talking to and laughing with young children at Sunday services is to be treasured. To be the custodian of a tradition and faith that make sense of existence is splendid.

Of course we have the highest job-satisfaction of anyone in the land. We have, indubitably the very best of all jobs.

A GLOWWORM AT PYLEWELL

On Easter Sunday afternoon Diana and I visited Pylewell Gardens, open for the day to the public. It was wet and soggy. An initial venture up a little used and wrong track nearly ended in our car being bogged down. Once we had found the right way, however, we were entranced as the sun came out to enhance our delight. Many year's ago I noted down an entry from the diaries of William Allingham dated 28 June 1863. Though

inconsequential it struck me as being rather lovely: *“In the evening I walked sadly along the shore of the Solent, eastwards by Pylewell - returning, I brought home a glow-worm and put it in a white lily, through which it shone.”*

(34) “This and That” - Easter Sunday 20 April, 2014

Resurrection! Absurd! A primitive dream of scattered bones congregating for a bizarre corroboree; dispersed dust drifting, gathering, settling into expectant, handy heaps; the four winds blowing rain and breath on to desiccated ingredients to remake long gone you, me, grandma, grandpa, Elizabeth I and Charlemagne. A primitive dream so absurd that sensible folk will have none of it, dreaming only of the possible and obvious. Commonsensically redefining Easter to mean chocolate bunnies, chocolate eggs and a lazy, leisure-filled, holiday weekend.

Shivering Bones

Yet entirely to shake off and discard the Resurrection absurdity is difficult. The primitive dream compels and fascinates. That bizarre and bony corroboree is so ancient and vibrant a dream. Beneath the cracked and crazy surface of dreams lies meaning and significance. To stand in a darkened church behind the great paschal candle on Holy Saturday night singing “The light of Christ” in celebration of absurd Resurrection, shivers my timbers, quivers my living bones.

Haunted

Life's apparent meaninglessness haunts almost all us,
that *Golden lads and girls all must*
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust,

and that *All lovers young, all lovers must*
Consign to thee, and come to dust,

will not do. Is unacceptable. There has to be more to human existence than ends in dust. This in one reason why we believers have never been able to shrug off the Church. Beneath whose obvious faults and cracked, crazy, incompetent, and sometimes scandalous surface we dimly perceive there to be something fascinating, true, lovely and possibly even eternal.

More Precious Than Anything

At the heart of the Christian narrative lies radical, forgiving, sacrificing love. Love of the sort that stops the human heart. Love that is the most profoundly moving of all human experiences. That impresses, challenges, strengthens us. Sometimes this radical love is dramatic, impulsive and heroic, as when a man rushes into a burning building to save the trapped and dying, willingly losing his life in doing so. Sometimes it is drawn out, life-long and heroic, as in those who give their whole life to the derelict and dying. Sometimes it is homely and familiar, as in a mother sacrificing her interests, pleasures and career for her children, or in a little child sacrificing its pocket money to buy dad a present.

Giving of the self for love of others, sacrificing the self for a beloved is the very best that human experience offers, “Greater love has no man than this”. Can such unutterable loveliness, be utterly futile, meaningless, dust, nothingness?

Beneath The Surface Of The Dream

One day a depressed disciple, who had seen sweet sacrificial love of this sort indeed come to nothing, who had seen radical love crucified and killed stone dead, had a sudden flash of insight. In response to a crazy tale from a distraught woman, he stepped into a tomb, saw that it was empty, and the penny dropped. Seeing nothing he saw everything. "Why, yes, of course! Of course the tomb is empty! Love's been vindicated by a God of Love"

Radical, sacrificing love doesn't die. It belongs to a different order of things. Is of God and so is vindicated by a God of love. In some unutterably mysterious, inexplicable way love is resurrected. Is granted a new, personal means of expression that is more than merely physical. "He saw," we are told, "and believed."

There is more to dust than dust. There's more to life than selfishness. Life's purpose, the reason we exist is simply to learn to love radically and sacrificially. We exist to learn to love, the more radically the better. This challenge is as open to the foolish as the wise and as to the wealthy as the poor. It is the only sure path to this-worldly let alone to other-worldly fulfilment.

(33) "This and That" - Sunday 13 April, 2014

Life without a vegetable garden is as incomplete as life without a parish church. An ideal day starts with a scalding shower, a leisurely recitation of morning prayer, the reading of a poem, breakfast and then a ruminative wander around a vegetable garden to tickle baby cauliflowers under the chin, share a joke with the carrots and gather a handful of raspberries, before returning to the study to listen to a Bach cantata.

Serene of demeanour

The Vicarage now has a vegetable garden. Stoutly fenced against deer and painstakingly rabbit proofed, it is smaller than the one we so enjoyed in Australia, but more than enough to keep us happy.

We began work on it shortly -after we arrived. Labouriously lifting turf and deeply digging a grassy patch to the west of the vicarage. We lightened the heavy soil with barrow loads of ancient leaf mould and decapitated some ancient laurels to provide more winter sunshine. An excellent fellow gave us a most reasonable quote for deer-proof fencing which, with Diana's help, he erected in a few hours. We both then spent several days carefully rabbit proofing it, there being an active warren nearby.

Already there are broad beans, beetroot, lettuce, radishes, onions and carrots sown and two rows of raspberries planted. My demeanour, you will notice, is more serene than heretofore.

Holy Week

The most memorable Good Friday service I experienced was my first Veneration of the Cross in Salisbury Cathedral, Rhodesia. It devastated me, bowled me over. Especially the totally silent procession of the clergy and servers into church followed by their sudden, unexpected and dramatic prostration before the bare altar. They lay flat on their faces for what seemed like ages. It stopped my heart. The 2.00pm Service at St

John's on Good Friday won't be quite so dramatic, but I trust it will nonetheless deeply move those with the good sense to attend.

A Golden Oasis

Before Good Friday though, there is the Maundy Thursday Eucharist that commemorates The Last Supper. An oasis of golden vestments, candlelight and peace in the middle of bleak Holy Week. A golden peace shattered by the stripping of the altar and sanctuary in the sudden gloom of the services' end. Not total gloom though. Jesus is still among us and so there remains the quiet beauty of the "altar of repose" in the Chapel. In Africa this was piled with red roses and ablaze with golden candlelight. On St Helena Island the candlelight haloed masses of wild ginger flowers whose fragrance surpassed any incense ever offered up to God. After this service has ended we are invited to return to the church in the middle of the night under an all but full paschal moon. There, before the fragrant altar, we watch with our Lord as heavy-eyed and sleepy disciples.

Hang All Your Hallelujahs Out

If we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the worship of Holy Week, Easter dawns with the joy that flooded Mary Magdalene's heart when...

*The holding stone broke open and gave birth
To her dear Lord, and his shadow ran
To meet him like a dog.
And as the sun
Burns though the simmering muslins of the mist
Slowly his darkened voice, that seemed like doubt,
Morninged into noon; the summering bees
Mounted and boiled over in the bell-flowers.
"Come out of your jail, Mary," he said, "the doors are open
And joy has its ear cocked for your coming.
Earth now is no place to mope in. So throw away
Your doubt, cast every clout of care,
Hang all your hallelujahs out this airy day." (W R Rodgers)*

(32) "This and That" - Sunday 6 April, 2014

I have always supposed myself to be a conservative. Not a fuddy duddy, old-fogey conservative, heaven forfend, more a radical one. A red Tory it you like. Suspicious of change, I embrace it with gusto once it proves itself to be inevitable or, more unlikely, once it proves itself to be good and right. In much ecclesiastical company I feel more a radical than the conservative I suppose myself at heart to be.

Such self analysis is highly suspect though. The self as observer of the self is untrustworthy. So whenever, as above, I expatiate upon myself, it needs treating with cynical suspicion. It is probably nonsense, evidence of mere self fascination or egotism.

A conservative Church

Mother Church is more usually conservative than not. As the custodian of hugely important and precious traditions it can hardly be expected to jettison them with ease and rush off to embrace what is new. Hence the Church's historical reluctance to embrace a vernacular bible and liturgy, to accept new scientific truths, to accommodate herself to

textual criticism of the bible, to allow remarriage after divorce, to ordain women, to consecrate women bishops, to modify or broaden her views on chastity or fully to accept homosexuality. The Church's motto, perhaps of necessity is: *if it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.*

Change we do in the end though, and Roman Catholicism tags along a good way behind us. It was interesting to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury on gay marriage last week. He gave no ground, but nor did he close any doors to an eventual change of heart.

The second episode of "Rev" on BBC 2 was as good as the first. It satirised our conservatism on Gay marriage, pointedly but without viciousness, hilariously but without contemptuous ridicule. It presented plausible reasons from both sides of the debate, but not laboriously or didactically. Its sympathies though were clearly with the progressive not the conservative viewpoint.

A universally applicable aphorism

The programme evinces an affectionate sympathy for the ordinary priest on his parish round and ground. There is less sympathy for the hierarchy, though the Archdeacon is shown to have a deeply buried vein of real charity beneath his sarcasm. In Adam Smallbone, the parish priest, love, lovingness and pastoral care conflict with law, authority and strict rectitude. In the end, after much typical Anglican vacillating and attempting to please everyone, he gives way to love. As too did Jesus in healing on the Sabbath, though being no Anglican without any vacillating. He laid down for us the universally applicable aphorism: "*The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath*".

Agree or disagree with Adam's eventual secret church wedding of a couple of gay friends, after a less controversial, but more public "few prayers", you cannot help but love so kind-hearted, fallible and authentic a parish priest.

Asked by Dominic Cavendish in "The Telegraph" if helping to write and perform the part of Adam had made him more spiritually minded, Tom Hollander responded "*Yes, it has, actually..... I'm afraid so. I've been in church more often.*" Asked if he would call himself a believer? He says "*I think I do. I have an idea of some sort of belief in, er, God. But I'm not quite sure what I believe God is. But the things one associates with God, as in trying to live an estimable life, I believe in.*" And was that a consequence of Rev? "*I've realised that must have been floating around in my head and that's probably why I did it – as opposed to sitting down to write a sitcom about a fireman.*"

[Home](#)