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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (July 2014)



From the Vicarage window

*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 **July 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>*

(47) “This and That” - 20 July, 2014

Pulex irritans, the species of flea that has the temerity to prey upon human beings, is as common in Palestine as in most other parts of the world. However fleas achieve little notice in the bible. Only once do they rate any mention. David in that most sparkling of all the world's historical narratives, the *First Book of Samuel*, describes himself in relation to King Saul as a dead dog or flea.

In the belly of a flea

John Donne, one of the greatest of all the deans of St Paul's in London, had greater respect for fleas. He wrote, before becoming a holy if gloomy dean, an ingenious and memorable poem about a flea. He used the mingling of bloods in its stomach in an argument to persuade his lady love to submit to him:

*It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be...*

This reminds me of a short period of my life when I and my family were thrown upon the mercy of Mother Church. We had recently left Zimbabwe and were in Johannesburg visiting my wife's mother, prior to catching a ship in Cape Town to take us to the Island of St Helena.

High handed Mrs Thatcher

We were listening to the news leisurely one night only to sit up in amazement when we heard mentioned the name of the ship we were booked on. It had been requisitioned as a supply ship in the Falklands War. Without any reference to us too. How high-handed of Mrs Thatcher.

You could only leave Zimbabwe in those days with \$1000 in cash, so we were not flush with money. We couldn't stay in Johannesburg for we needed to be in Cape Town to be ready to board any substitute ship that was found. So we threw ourselves upon the mercy of the Diocese of Cape Town and were not disappointed.

A fissured mattress

We were put up in the house of a recently deceased and obviously very Anglo Catholic lady while her estate was settled. She smiled at us each morning and evening from a tumbler of water in the bathroom where her false teeth resided. My wife and I slept in her ancient double bed, its posts festooned with rosaries. The mattress was ancient and fissured. Out of the fissures, during the night, crept fleas in whose shiny little bellies, as in John Donne's flea's belly, our blood mingled with the blood of the deceased lady. If I were as brilliant as John Donne I might, in an ingenious poem, have used this mingling of the blood of living and dead to symbolise the ephemeral nature of the divide between life and death.

There were crucifixes, holy pictures and little prayer cards arranged around the house as well as plenty of empty liquor bottles. The last as authentic a sign of true and happy anglo-catholicism as the others!

Nose wrinkling incense

We inherited the lady's maid and her little dog as well. The maid introduced us to the church the lady had attended at Salt River. It was indeed a high church establishment. My little son was intrigued by the swinging thurible which accompanied the Gospel procession down to our pew. He craned forward to take a sniff, wrinkled his nose and said, as if he were a member of the congregation at St John's Boldre, "pooh". This cannot have been a genetic influence from his low church grandfather on my mother's side because my elder son is adopted.

Posthumous charity

After some months we embarked for the seven day voyage to St Helena upon a tiny little 600 ton ship called "The Aragonite". We did so grateful to the diocese of Cape Town and for the posthumous charity of an intriguing Anglo-Catholic lady whom I still sometimes recall with the faithful departed at the Eucharist.

Posthumous charity did I say? Yes indeed, the divide between life and death is ephemeral, is crossed by charity. What a pity I am not John Donne. There's a poem waiting for a poet!

(46) **“This and That” - 13 July, 2014**

I have never lived in a house where grace is not said before a meal. It is usually a perfunctory exercise with chops well licked and a mouth full of anticipatory saliva. As such it could easily be dismissed as a futile exercise in hypocrisy. But there is more to hypocrisy than meets the eye. It has its merits.

Exposed

When I was a boy I remember as we said grace one day watching my brother. He didn't close his eyes, he didn't bother to pretend to piety. He clicked his fingers at the dog and scratched its ears. I said to our mother, *“Peter didn't close his eyes to say grace.”* To which my mother replied: *“How do you know if you closed yours?”* My brother gave me a derisory grin of triumph. I was exposed as a hypocrite, pretending to a piety I obviously didn't feel myself.

However, I did think grace important enough to put on an act for. That is why I complained at my brother's blatant disregard of it. He didn't care enough even to put on an act. Which was worse? It might well have been my brother's blatant honesty.

A hypocrite has values. The person who couldn't care less about appearances, who couldn't give a damn, who doesn't bother even to appear good, might commendably be no hypocrite, but is often in a far worse case. Valuing nothing.

Happy hypocrisy

The novelist John Le Carré has made the point better than I can: *“I am a hypocrite. I am a great believer in hypocrisy. It is the nearest we ever get to virtue. It is a statement of what we ought to be. Like religion, like art, like the law, like marriage, I serve the appearance of things.”*

Jesus condemned the pharisees, not so much for hypocrisy as for mistaking the appearance of things, for the reality. For mistaking acted goodness for goodness itself. The state of the heart and mind had become irrelevant to them. It was necessary only to keep the rules, keep up appearances, and then all was well, you were good, and so could view yourself with complacent self-satisfaction.

This is hypocrisy's great danger. We need always to remember and acknowledge just how hypocritical we are, just how much our goodness is an act. And so never become content with the mere pretence, but rather strive to turn it into goodness into the real thing, into a matter of the heart and disposition. This is something that can best be done in the company and love of Jesus and his Church.

On special occasions, to help saying grace before a meal to be something other than perfunctory, I sometimes take a little trouble and compose one:

Grace for a Fish and Chip Night

*As well, Lord, as to fish and chips
To praise, please open thou our lips!
Helps us love the things that matter
As well as fish fried crisp in batter.*

*Let our hearts with love be filled.
Not just our guts with fish well-grilled.
For we're not vulgar sorts and crude,
We know there's more to life than food.
If life's no more than well-greased lips,
Then when we die... we've had our chips.*

(45) "This and That" - 6 July, 2014

Jesus once denounced and insulted his host at a dinner party (*Luke 11:37-54*). I too once insulted my hostess at a dinner party, though unintentionally.

Insulting

After an exceedingly fine meal, when I was mellow, warm and expansive from good red wine, I was asked, as were my fellow guests, to adorn a visitors' book with my signature and a flattering comment. There had been much laughter and joking at the meal, some of it a little risqué and so, with my critical faculties dulled by the good red wine, I wrote in the book what, to me, seemed an appreciative comment, "A delightfully ribald evening," and then signed my name with a flourish. I found out later that my hostess was mortified and insulted. I was never invited there again. A friend informed me that where the criminal comment had been written, there was now only a nasty eraser mark. I am at my most bland and platitudinous when commenting in visitors books these days.

One of the great privileges of being a priest is to be welcome in the homes of all sorts of people. I have mightily enjoyed dining with both peasants and nobles and with both poor and rich. The hospitality of the poor is often astonishing. Some of the old folk to whom I took the sacrament each month in their tiny cottages, on St Helena Island, would go to no end of trouble to prepare a feast for me. To talk gardening, fishing and about the good old days with them was heart-warming and fascinating.

An ugly failing

The word "snob" originally meant someone lowly, but with a vulgar admiration for wealth or social position. So those right at the top could not be snobs, instead, at least in the Derbyshire where I originate, they were called nobles. Nowadays though, the word snob seems to have broadened its meaning to include anyone who looks down upon others as inferior. It is an ugly failing, present, at least to a degree, in all of us. The best way of combatting it, is to mix deliberately in circles wider than one's own.

The parish church, for example, should be a place where all types, classes and sorts happily forget their differences and learn to appreciate each other. On holiday once I went to a celebration of the Eucharist in St Peter's Cathedral in Adelaide. It was good to witness the congregation's amused and kindly acceptance of two muttering, chattering and unkempt ruffians. I am not referring to myself and wife!

Pietistic snobs

It is a common human characteristic to cultivate the society only of one's own kind. Jesus's host and fellow guests at the dinner I alluded to earlier were pharisees.

They had raised the tendency to cultivate the society only of their own sort into a spiritual principle. They refused all social contact with those who did not share their standards of piety. They would have considered themselves to be slumming it by having Jesus to dine. He was in the process of proving himself untouchable to them with his so much more open view of the religious Law, and his willingness to rub shoulders with, and share the lives of those less than pure and undefiled.

It might be more comfortable and satisfying to mix socially only with one's own kind, but it is also unadventurous, narrow and dull. There is little in such company to challenge us to widen our views or change our outlook. We can remain cocooned happily in our own prejudices. How comforting and comfortable! Yet there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our own little philosophies and circles and they are worth exploring. Such exploration, like all exploration, is exciting and challenging, as well as being, sometimes, uncomfortable or even downright dangerous. Yet another reason, perhaps, why some folk disdain churchgoing, cowardice.

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