

Advent and Christmas greetings for 2024 from Andrew and Diana in Wells, Somerset



Wells Cathedral Lady Chapel

At a quarter to eight each day, Diana and I leave our snug and much loved city centre pad to take a five minute walk eastward, to the Cathedral's Lady Chapel, for the morning liturgy. There we settle down at peace in its wondrous, octagon of space. The roof is a star of Bethlehem, a "star in the east". Its eight vertices curve down to embrace and bless worshippers below.

Four of the five great windows are filled with a chaotic mosaic of broken shards, and splinters of stained glass. The original glass was so thoroughly shattered, by puritanical zealots in the 17th century, it could only be reassembled as non-representational collages of colour. To gaze at them, as the morning sun rises, is to gaze into a chaos that isn't quite total, because, like our colourful but chaotic world, there are hints and glimpses of something other, of something different, of possible order, sense and meaning. There are shards and pieces of glass that remain representative of the reality that once upon a time was depicted in full and detailed clarity. Recognisable faces and figures appear here and there and all the while, beyond and behind the windows there are silhouettes, not of angels, but of jackdaws and pigeons,

rising, falling and telling of life and a world beyond the here and now. God has a way with chaos.

The dawn, round robins and daily celebrations

Those who disdain and mock Christmas 'round-robin' letters are given short shrift by Diana and me. This is because they've played a pivotal role in our lives. It was an annual Christmas 'round-robin' letter that alerted Diana to my likely visit to England in 2010 and so enabled a consequential meeting. The first since, 28 years previously, we had waved goodbye to each other, with our respective families, on the Island of **St Helena**. It was another annual Christmas 'round robin' letter that alerted Frank Willett, the retiring priest in charge of St John the Baptist, **Boldre**, in **Hampshire**, of our availability and readiness to replace him there.

Round robins! Fluffed up, little red breasted ones feature on secular Christmas cards, but it takes a poet of the calibre of R S Thomas to bring perfectly together, the dawn, a robin and daily liturgical celebrations:

Robin



Wells Cathedral at dawn

*Dawn. The robin
crumbles his song
into a few pieces
for our Communion.
And humbly we accept;
we need the sacrament
of the Real Presence
if we are to continue
to believe. Pure
spirit is a refraction
only. It is the rainbow
in life's spray that,
when we put our starved hand
into, lets our hand through.*



*But this wafer of song
we touch with the tip
of our belief, is it not
the pearl without price
we were told of and
have come upon that
we must give up all
our payments on a hire-purchase
happiness to make our own?*

A return to globe trotting

We returned to globe trotting this year. Not in search of geographic wonders, wildness of novelty, but to revel in mere human beings, in our relationships with family and friends. On the 19th of February we flew to **Cape Town** to stay for a week with my brother-in-law, Bob Bedingham, to rejoice, for the first time since the pandemic, in his good company and that of his fine and talented family. We were there, as well, fondly to remember my lovely sister, his wife Sue, who died of Covid in January 2021. What a glorious place to socialise is the **Cape Peninsular**. We loved every minute of the visit and every member of the family.

We then made our way to **Australia** and **Brisbane** to stay with my brother and his wife Sue. It was a memorable week of good food, good drink, good conversation and lots of rollicking reminiscing about our fine parents, our boyhood in the African bush, our bizarre boarding school and beer quaffing, cigarette smoky, girl-heady, salad days in **Rhodesia**. There was an opportunity as well to meet up with and enjoy the hospitality of their **Brisbane** son, Jim, his wife Dilshani and their lovely children.

From **Brisbane** we flew south to stay with my son Peter in **Albury**, to share his adventurous, bachelor's life, assist in ambitious house renovations and to be driven up the Murray river valley in his well kitted out, four-wheel-drive van. We stayed for a couple of midsummer nights in the **Thredbo** ski resort and walked to Australia's highest peak, **Mount Kosciusko**. Peter also helped arrange a joyous and happy meal with a group of my fine, once upon a time, **Wodonga** parishioners and another with the inimitable, law-unto-himself and talented Rector of **Albury**, who lives in and owns the city's most magnificent and exotic homestead.

From **Albury** we travelled by train to spend a couple of nights of reminiscence and largely charitable gossip with the one time dean of **Wangaratta**, Ray McInnes and his wife Glenys, always the best of company. It was good to conjure up and revisit, in good humoured conversation, a diocese we had both been heavily involved in for years, and which, strangely, appears to have survived our departure, after a fashion. We then caught a train to **Geelong** and the ferry to **Tasmania** to stay with Simon and Meredith Nettleton, an idiosyncratic, delightful couple whose wedding I'd taken years previously, both of them crazy on Scottish dancing and ballet.

There followed a bus trip to **Hobart** and three weeks in the home of my **St Helena** born daughter Elizabeth, her husband Nathan and their four fabulous, lively daughters, Meg, Susie, Hetty and Josephine. We immersed ourselves in their family life: shopping, cooking, sewing, walking the dog, gardening, driving the girls to judo or school, accompanying them to church, visiting their favourite beauty spots with them and more. It was a holiday of holidays for being people oriented rather than mere ogling and sightseeing.



Wine Glass Bay, **Tasmania**

Life in **England**

Much of our activity in **England** is people and family focussed too. Locally, Diana's daughter Martha, her husband Llew and Max, 'Bella and Theo are very much a part of our lives, not least because our vegetable garden is a part of their garden. They live 300 feet higher than we do, a couple of miles away on the slopes of the **Mendips**. Llew and I enjoy noting differences in rainfall between the two locations. The family lead busy lives, but don't forget us, they drop in and use us whenever necessary, and we them, to our mutual delight. Max is at university, Bella in the workforce and Theo, a voracious reader, is in his final year at primary school.

We make regular sorties east to visit and stay with our other three family families, who conveniently now live within a ten-mile radius of each other. 'Pula, Diana's son, his wife Olga, and Mariana and Zoë their two confident and self assured teenage daughters live in **Haslemere**; my son David, Rachel his wife and Thomas their bright eyed, articulate 10-year-old son live eight miles away in **Chiddingfold**; Ray, my daughter, Tom, her husband and their irresistibly attractive, voluble and inquisitive three-year-old James and tiny, seven months old, lovely Lucy live in **Grayshott**, a couple of miles from Haslemere. They're about a hundred miles from **Wells**. We know the route well and feel totally at ease and welcome in all three households. We mind the **Haslemere** dogs, Frida and Sibyl and the **Chiddingfold** dog Phoebe, when their owners are away and while doing so enjoy and delight in any grandchildren who remain around. As grandparents we are blessed by ready access to and intimacy with, generations other than our own. Our sons and daughters are now pretty well middle aged, halcyon years when looked back upon from our age, though too busy to be perceived as such from theirs. Their sons and daughters, ranging from 7 months to 21 years, appear, at least sometimes, to love us and take us seriously, which is a privilege that challenges any tendency in either of us towards old fogeyism or fuddy duddyness.

Neither of us is quite fully retired. Diana mends Cathedral altar frontals, alters priestly robes, curtains clergy windows and more. I am the 'Retired Clergy Officer' for **Wells** and so keep an eye on and visit, with Diana, more than 30 priests or priest widows. I also enjoy four hour, 'day chaplaincy' stints in the Cathedral.

Nowadays most of our good friends and fellow church and worship junkies are elderly and begin to drop off the twig. I played a part, almost a year ago, in the funeral of my oldest and best friend from university days in **Rhodesia**, Tony Spooner. His wife, two daughters and many friends gave him a resounding send off in **Clacton on Sea**. My own tribute to an intriguing friend, priest and major influence can be read on my website. I miss my regular phone calls to him.

In September we took a trip north to visit other contemporary friends. In the **Lake District**, a lovely aunt of Diana's son-in-law, in **Ripon**, another Rhodesian university friend and in **Sheffield**, a school friend of Diana's. Family, friends and loving relationships are what life and heaven are all about. At perfectly sung Choral Evensongs in the Cathedral, the opening words of the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace....." are always, to me, a *memento mori*, infused, though, with gratitude not fear.

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Blessings abundant
For Christmas &
the New Year.

Andrew &
Diana

