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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (November 2017)



BURNT HOUSE LANE ON AN AUTUMN MORNING

*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 **November 2017** 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>

(220) “This and That” - 26 November 2017

Mount Ararat is a mighty, snow capped volcano in eastern Turkey. It has two cones. Greater Ararat, 16,854 feet above sea level (the highest peak in Turkey) and Little Ararat, 12,782 feet above sea level. The last eruption was in 1840. Noah’s Ark is said to have come to rest on its slopes.

Mount Ararat the pimple

Neaum’s Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat twice. Firstly in 1985 for a few months. There Rachel my fourth child was born. Then again in 1991 for six years. This was Ararat in Australia. A pimple compared to Ararat in Turkey. I was Rector of the town of Ararat, adjacent to the pimple.

In it’s fine, bluestone church one cold Sunday evening, a nightmare came true. I made my measured and stately way to the pulpit during the penultimate verse of the penultimate hymn to deliver a well-prepared and well thought out sermon. When I arrived the sermon was not there. I descended at speed, did a couple of panic-stricken turns about the chancel, and then bolted from the church to my study. I returned, clasping my sermon, to a quiet church and a congregation wondering if I had I been taken ill, suffered a crisis of faith, or like Zechariah seen a vision?

Be prepared

I like to be well prepared for worship. It is not only the sermon that is scripted, so is the whole service. In all my years of preaching, that occasion in Holy Trinity Ararat’s pulpit, is the only time I can recall letting myself down.

I like other participants in worship to be well prepared too. Not least readers of scripture. Those who come to read in church without any preparation whatsoever deserve a special kind of punishment.

They need to be asked, without prior notice, to read a portion from the book *Obadiah*. Only to find, on approaching the lectern, that the bible is closed and unmarked. How delicious to see them riffle, at first confidently, through the minor prophets without finding the anorexically slim book of Obadiah. Then more and more frantically, once, twice, three times, until giving up they have recourse to the index.

The unforgivable gaffe

The very worst gaffe I ever heard from a lector was during the Passion Narrative on Good Friday in Holy Trinity Ararat. Not once, but twice the name *Annas* was pronounced confidently and emphatically as *Anus*. I trust that the reader's wife kicked his after the service!

At my theological college in Grahamstown, South Africa, chapel services on Tuesdays were conducted in Afrikaans. We heard some astonishing performances. Just as a donkey can be defined as a horse translated into Dutch, so scripture rendered by the inept into Afrikaans has a hee haw, hee-haw, hawtiness and floppy-earedness that is more amusing than edifying.

The reading of scripture should be a high point in the unfolding of the liturgy. When confidently and flawlessly proclaimed the bible sparks into the Epistle to the Hebrew’s *living and active two edged sword*. If it is to do so it has to avoid idiosyncratic or dramatic renditions. The bible during worship is best allowed to speak for itself. It needs to be read correctly and clearly, that is all. Idiosyncratic or questionable emphases are not helpful.

Decanal chagrin

The one time Bishop of Matabeleland, Robert Mercer, was very much a traditionalist as regards liturgy. Soon after his election as bishop in 1977 he was required to celebrate a weekday eucharist in his Cathedral. The dean of Bulawayo Cathedral was a liturgical progressive. He was also less than ecstatic at Bishop Mercer’s appointment.

He required, with a measure of pleasure, his new bishop to use the “new liturgy” in the Cathedral. On the first occasion Bishop Mercer, so the story goes, asked for a copy the night before. He went through it changing every “you” to “thee” or “thou”. Then to his delight he

noticed that the first reading happened to be from the *Apocrypha*. It enabled him to say at its end, not: *This is the Word of the Lord*, but instead, with a mischievous grin, *I am afraid that the Church, in its wisdom, has never ever been able quite to make up its mind as to whether or not this is in fact the Word of the Lord or not*. The Dean was not amused.

(219) “This and That” - 19 November 2017

For two years I taught English to the boys of *Alan Wilson Technical High School* in Rhodesia. They wore khaki uniforms with black and red jerseys and black and red blazers. Most were exceedingly pimply.

Peanut butter sandwiches

It was their school lunches that did it. Peanut butter sandwiches. The smell of them still makes me feel ill. Tacky, viscous, gunky, gloopy, gluey, gooey. How the stuff sticks to the top of the mouth.

On a hot day, after long confinement in a plastic lunch-box, their stink when the box is opened, frizzes beards, curdles milk, and sends blow flies buzz, buzz, buzzing into a frenzy of aerobic dives, climbs and somersaults around the classroom. After lunch the school yard was littered with crusts and corners of peanut butter sandwiches. Pied crows, holding their beaks, pecked at them disdainfully.

Salted fish

Jesus was a teacher. A better one than me. He didn't despise his pupils' food. A young lad sent off for the day by his mother with five little bread rolls and two small fish, didn't revolt Jesus. Though salted fish on a hot summer's day in Palestine must have ponged as pungently as any peanut butter sandwich.

Jesus was a better teacher than me in other ways too. He was interesting to listen to and told fascinating stories. My pupils when bored with poetry, or mystified by grammar would sneak their hands under the lids of their desk, open their lunch box and break off pieces of sandwich to eat. The smell gave them away. Not so the boy with the fish and loaves. He was so interested he forgot about his lunch until the end of the day. It was only when he heard someone say to Jesus, *What can we give all of them to eat?* that his tummy rumbled and lunch was remembered.

No laughing matter

Also remembered were some of the points Jesus had made in his stories. Those to do with sharing, being generous and loving your neighbour. So much so that he responded to the man who had asked Jesus: *What can we give them all to eat?* by saying, *I have my lunch here, five little loaves and two fish, I would love to share them.....* The man he spoke to would have thought the offer a bit of a joke, but he took the boy to Jesus nonetheless and said, doubtless with a chuckle in his voice: *Perhaps this will do to feed a mere 5000 people? Five loaves and two fish?*

There was no laughter from Jesus. He looked at the loaves and fish. He looked at the lad. He perceived genuine generosity. *Get everyone to sit down....* he said. He blessed the boy's lunch, began to share it and everyone was fed. Everyone. Twelve baskets were left over.

The power of one

Was it a bare-faced, shameless miracle or a more subtle one to do with love and sharing? Who knows? Who cares?

A simple point was being made. No matter how insignificant we feel or indeed are, no matter how few our talents, and gifts, if we offer ourselves and them to God with generosity of heart, great things can be done with us, through us and for us.

The boy and his lunch remind us of the power of the small, the power of one, the power of the little. It's a truth that lies at the heart of our faith. The obscure judicial murder of an

insignificant peripatetic teacher unleashed God's love dynamically in the world. A mere gibbet became the greatest of all symbols of selfless love

On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness

*The tusks that clashed in mighty brawls
Of mastadons, are billiard balls.*

*The sword of Charlemagne the Just
Is ferric oxide, known as rust.*

*The grizzly bear whose potent hug
Was feared by all, is now a rug*

*Great Caesar's bust is on the shelf,
And I don't feel so well myself.* (A Guiterman)

(218) "This and That" - 12 November 2017

The word "gender" sticks in the craw. It used to be restricted to grammar. No longer. It has crossed over into matters sociological and biological to confuse us all. Boys will be girls and girls will be boys. Bah!

Sex or Gender?

That "Bah!" is not entirely justified. Used carefully outside the realm of grammar, the word "gender" makes useful distinctions. If I understand the changes in terminology rightly, what defines male and female biologically is their "sex". What defines male and female, sociologically, nowadays, is their "gender".

Beards or their absence, a broken or unbroken voice and the absence or presence of other biological bits and pieces determine our sex. It was ever thus.

Length of hair, skirts or trousers, socks or stockings, pink or blue, dolls or lorries, roles in the work force, and the like are socially determined and indicate our "gender".

When asked by government forms to declare our maleness or femaleness we should be asked not only our gender but also our sex. 99 percent should be able to respond: Sex: either "Male" or "Female". Gender: "A bit of both", "mostly male", "mostly female", or anywhere else on the spectrum. Though best of all "mind your own business".

Why is Boldre the best of parishes?

I have been in Boldre for over four years. In a little while it will have been longer than in four of the previous seven parishes in which I've served. They've been good years too. As good as anywhere. Why would that be?

For a start I'm an old bokkie. A priest of 40 years standing with a 22 year dress rehearsal in the vicarages and mission homes of my father. If by now I'm not well versed in priestcraft and wise to the foibles, follies, friendships and enmities of parishioners, who is?

I am also settled in belief. The privilege of attempting to make sense of the foolishness of God in homilies, sermons, articles and conversations over many years has borne fruit. I know what I believe as well as I am ever likely to. It flirts here and there with doubt and heresy (if there is such a thing), but is the faith universal, nipped and tucked a little. It fits. It makes sense of my existence. I love it. I delight in it. I trumpet it. It respects unbelief and acknowledges its own sweet absurdity, but is beautiful and compelling.

Boldre is different

Then too Boldre is different. For a start it's in England. I've never priested here before, so that's fun. The demographics are different too. I have enjoyed working among all sorts and conditions of mankind over the years. To be working in my retirement among so many at the same

stage of life makes sense. If only for not having to apologise too frequently for preferring Schubert's lieder to Amy Winehouse, or Wells Cathedral choir to Hillsong.

Yet to be something of an outsider is also a boon. Atlantic isles, Rhodesia and Australia have left their mark. There's a hint of a rough edge. A trace of the not quite fully tamed wild colonial boy. I get away with more than most.

Finally, there is no material need for Diana and me to be here. We are here voluntarily, because we want to be. I love parish priesting and lovely St John's church. To be provided with so fine a Vicarage, gratis, is a bonus of bonuses.

The labourer is worthy of his hire. Priests do need paying. Yet to be able at last to work with no regard for remuneration is liberating. The closest we've been to it before was on the Island of St Helena where the salary was a pittance. Yet how good it was to be there for reasons more than mere money. That too was an unusually happy time. The Church of England is relying more and more on folk prepared to parish priest for little or nothing. It says a lot about the joys of the calling. It is also closer to the model provided by a remarkable person in Palestine centuries ago.

A biblically literate drunk

A drunk climbed aboard the bus to Southampton and spoke to the man opposite. "What's your name then?" "Paul," said the man, intensely embarrassed to become the focus of attention of the other passengers. The drunk was silent for a few moments, then asked, "Say, did those Thessalonians ever write back to you?"

(217) "This and That" - 5 November 2017

I was a choirboy for nine months. Likewise an embryo. Both experiences were hugely influential. Though I can remember little of the first and nothing of the second.

In the choir

It is an honour to be a choirboy. Three quarters of the recumbent drunks encountered around inner city churches acknowledge this. They excuse their litter and shabby presence by claiming to have sung in the church's choir as a lad.

It was Christchurch Belper, in Derbyshire that recruited my brother and myself into their choir. In the time honoured fashion. My father informed us that we were joining. That was that. He had been a chorister in the same choir.

For talking during practice once his choirmaster threw a book at him with deadly accuracy. Aggrieved, he returned home to inform his parents he was leaving the choir. There was no parental sympathy. He was sent straight back, in the dark, to apologise for talking out of place. He remained in the choir beyond adulthood, to his inestimable benefit. He grew up able to sing a bass, tenor or alto line and was choirmaster in all his parishes.

That my brother and I lasted only nine months in Christ Church Belper's choir was because we were in transit. Having left the island of Tristan da Cunha we were soon to move on to mission station life in Rhodesia.

In the womb

The womb in which I spent nine months an embryo belonged to Dorothy Maud Neaum. She too was a chorister and also a pianist. So the blissful buoyancy of my amniotic fluid tenancy was enhanced by music from the world outside. Just as my blissful tenancy of the world of time and space around Boldre is enhanced by intimations of beauty, harmony and love from a world beyond this one.

I suspect my mother continued to smoke throughout her pregnancy and to eat cheese made from unpasteurised milk. There would have been little alcohol. Vicarage life was too frugal. She carried me well though. I arrived weighing nine and a half pounds and in perfect health, to be

baptized in the church of St Mary the Virgin, Gratwich, in the diocese of Lichfield. To my inestimable benefit.

Congratulations

Diana and I received a lovely photograph of Sophie Taylor a couple of weeks ago. She is Adrian and Rosie's little girl who enlivened our choir stalls when Rosie sang in them and Adrian was organist. In those days, a curly-headed blonde in a tiny blue cassock, angelic to behold she was a perfect little choir mascot. She now wears a little red cassock, remains angelic, but is no longer a mere mascot. She is a full member of the choir of St Mary's Ross on Wye. Her brother Alex continues a chorister of Gloucester Cathedral.

Congratulations to Ben Van der Hoven. He has been awarded the first St John's Boldre Choral Scholarship. He performed impressively at his audition and both Timothy and I had no hesitation in accepting his application.

We trust his time with us will be a great joy to him, that he will develop into a fine chorister and musician and will be joined by at least one other young person before long.

No atheists in a shell hole

Next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday. An Australian version of an old story seems right for the occasion:

Two diggers were sitting in a shell hole near Tobruk. The shells were coming over thick and fast. One turned to the other and said: "Bazza, I'm scared rigid. Let's have a prayer." "Prayer?" said the other, "What do you think this is, mate, a Sunday school outing?" Time passed by and the shells came still more thick and fast. Bombs began to fall and it became hell let loose. The one turned to the other and said: "Bazza, I think we're in for a right blasting. Do you know any hymns?" "Hymns?" said the other, "What do you think I am mate, an opera star?" Ten more minutes went by and they thought that their last moment had come; whereupon Bazza at last took off his helmet, turned his eyes to heaven and said: "I reckon it's time we did something really religious - pass my helmet round, let's have a collection."

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