

# Home

## **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE**



*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. What follows is a collection of weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations to augment his visits and keep folk in touch week in and week out.*

### **(22) “This and That” - Sunday 26 January, 2014**

One of the loveliest, wittiest and wisest of Anglican parsons was the seventeenth century historian Thomas Fuller.

#### **Beginning to grudge**

Who could not but love a man who writes: *“Lord: I discover an arrant laziness in my soul. For when I am to read a chapter in the Bible, before I begin it, I look where it endeth. And if it endeth not on the same side, I cannot keep my hands from turning over the leaf to measure the length thereof on the other side; if it swells to many verses, I begin to grudge..... Scourge, Lord, this laziness out of my soul; make the reading of thy Word not a penance but a pleasure unto me....”* I confess I have often been the same myself. It is a great comfort to discover that I share such a failing with so lovely and godly a man as Thomas Fuller!

#### **A luminary**

When Diana and I say Matins together each morning these days, we avoid “laziness of soul” in reading the lessons by making them collaborative. We read both of

them in alternate, short and arbitrary nuggets. Diana will read three or four verses and stop, whereupon I will take over for a similar number of verses and so on. This compels us to be attentive in order to avoid missing our cue. To be attentive is to be interested and so we quite often end up discussing obscure or interesting points that arise.

I first came across the sane, witty, balanced and attractive Thomas Fuller in a little book called "*Thoughts and Contemplations...*". I picked it up for nothing in Harare many years ago. He was an Anglican priest and historian during the awful years leading up to, during and after the Civil War. He was a Royalist, though not fanatically so. Coleridge maintained him to be "*incomparably the most sensible, the least prejudiced, great man of an age that boasted a galaxy of great men*". I can only concur. He is one of our Church's luminaries, worthy of wider renown.

### **Lighten my burden or strengthen my back**

Here he is on sickness: "*Lord: When thou shalt visit me with a sharp disease, I fear I shall be impatient; for I am choleric by my nature and tender by my temper, and have not been acquainted with sickness all my lifetime. I cannot expect any kind of usage from that which hath been a stranger to me. I fear I shall rave and rage..... Teach me the art of patience whilst I am well, and give me the use of it when I am sick. In that day either lighten my burthen or strengthen my back. Make me, who so often, in my health, have discovered my weakness, presuming on my own strength, to be strong in my sickness, when I solely rely on thy assistance.*"

### **Satirised sentimentality**

One of Princess Diana's favourite poem was a piece of sentimental Victoriana "Ye Wearie Wayfarer" by Adam Lindsay Gordon. Kingsley Amis did a rewrite to make it more reflective of the spirit of our times. Here are the two versions:

#### **Ye Wearie Wayfarer**

*Life is mostly froth and bubble,  
Two things stand like stone.  
Kindness in another's trouble,  
Courage in your own. (Adam Lindsay Gordon)*

#### **Ye Wearie Wayfarer**

*Life is mainly grief and labour.  
Two things get you through.  
Chortling when it hits your neighbour,  
Whingeing when it's you. (Kingsley Amis)*

### **(21) "This and That" - Sunday 19 January, 2014**

Most of us who love the Church are troubled by empty pews. Success tends to be measured in numbers. Yet parish priests are actually paid to be idle. This might seem odd coming from a recovering workaholic of a priest, but surely priests are paid to sit, think, work things through, pray, read, speculate, contemplate and meditate as well as to scramble for numbers. Thoughtfulness, wisdom and learning are as necessary as and less ephemeral than mere popularity. In a parish priest it is as important to be as to do.

### ***Necessary Idleness***

Numbers are important of course, but the success of a priest too busy to be idle, too active to be still, is likely to be shallow and short-lived. A parson needs to be widely read and broad of sympathies, to have an informed and thought-through faith, and so to be worth of and available for consultation. Such qualities are the product of joyous, "idle" hours spent in the company of books, music and God.

There was once just such a parish priest called Andrew Young. He was vicar of the country parish of Stonegate in Sussex until his retirement in 1959. He died in 1971 leaving a legacy of truly lovely poems, one of which says what I have said above, but perfectly:

### **Shirk No Idleness**

*God, you've so much to do,  
To think of, watch and listen to,  
That I will let all else go by  
And lending ear and eye  
Help you to watch how in the combe  
Winds sweep dead leaves without a broom;  
And rooks in the spring-reddened trees  
Restore their villages,  
Nest by dark nest  
Swaying at rest on the trees' frail unrest;  
Or on this limestone wall,  
Leaning at ease, with you recall  
How once these heavy stones  
Swam in the sea as shells and bones;  
And hear that owl snore in a tree  
Till it grows dark enough for him to see;  
In fact, will learn to shirk  
No idleness that I may share your work.*

### **Oliver St John Gogarty**

The interestingly named Oliver St John Gogarty who lived from 1878 to 1957 was a poet, surgeon, and close friend of James Joyce who portrayed him in the novel "Ulysses" as "stately, plump Buck Mulligan". He published several novels and volumes of verse and was highly rated by Yeats. This little gem cocks a snook at death:

### **To Death**

<i>But for your Terror</i>	<i>Taker and Giver,</i>
<i>Where would be Valour?</i>	<i>For all your endeavour</i>
<i>What is Love for</i>	<i>You leave us with more</i>
<i>But to stand in your way?</i>	<i>Than you touch with decay.</i>

### **Sweet Christianity**

Seventeen hundred years ago St Cyprian wrote thus: "*This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of the vines. But if I climb some great mountain and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what*

*I would see - brigands on the roads, pirates on the high seas, in the amphitheatres men murdering each other to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than the pleasures of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. These people, Donatus, are the Christians, and I am one of them."*

**(20) "This and That" - Sunday 12 January, 2014**

How satisfying these past few sodden months have been. My only regret is that the Vicarage roof is not corrugated iron. One of the sweetest sounds in the world is rain beating on an iron roof. The souging of wild wind in bare oak trees comes a close second. There were over two and a half inches of rain in our gauge when we arrived back from four days away over the New Year period. Lovely.

**Longing for rain**

Longing for rain was a part of my daily life for the many years I spent in Rhodesia, South Africa and Australia. Only the three and a half years on Tristan da Cunha were wetter than England this winter. Tristan's annual average rainfall is sixty six inches. The three invigorating weeks we spent there in 2012 were mostly wet. The wind-driven rain was horizontal. Lovely.

**Broken Taboos**

It appears that we need taboos. They help mark us off as civilized, assure us that we are on the side of the righteous, the clever or the sophisticated. They enable us to indulge in the luxury of moral indignation. Humourists and comedians need them to tweak, stretch or break in order to shock us into laughter or outrage. A life without taboos of some sort or other would surely be very much less than it might be.

Most of the old moral and religious taboos in our society appear to have gone. Diana and I spent most of New Year week in London and while there we were treated to a satirical, comedy cabaret show at the Queen Elizabeth Hall called "*Fascinating Aida*".

It was highly enjoyable, extremely witty, very funny and at times quite brilliant. The songs were artfully varied. Clever satirical ones, some extremely lewd or angry, were interspersed with others that were full of pathos and very beautiful. There were two clever series of extremely brief, almost aphoristic and topical little musical morsels as well. All the lyrics and tunes appear to have been written by two of the three women performers.

Sexually the show was completely taboo free, both in vocabulary and subject matter. The A, B, C, D and F words were all used with gusto and no hesitation. Broad minded I most certainly am and I dislike prudery and censoriousness, but on such occasions I discover within myself a residual discomfort and unease at a world without any sexual taboos at all, a world in which anything, but anything can be articulated and permitted.

I cannot be all alone in my unease because a good deal of the show's humorous edge came, I think, from the shock of broken taboos that have not yet quite been let go

of by many in the audience. If I am right comedians need to beware. Once these taboos have been completely let go, the edge to the humour will depart as well.

### **New taboos and inquisitors**

Old taboos are inevitably replaced by new ones though. Racist jokes are today's blasphemies, as too would be paedophile-sympathising jests. We nearly all approve of latter day inquisitors who search out and prosecute offenders. Climate-change, eco-sensitivity, multiculturalism, smoking bans and even atheism are part of an emerging orthodoxy for comedians and would be heretics to rail against. An "anything goes" life is unthinkable. Taboos there will always be.

### **Last words**

What a wonderful invention is the roundabout. The Swahili word for it is "kipilefti" which comes from the "keep left" sign as you approach one. The beautifully onomatopoeic Shona word for a motorbike is: "mudhudhudhu".

### **(19) "This and That" - Sunday 5 January, 2014**

On my way home from Melbourne on the Hume Highway in Australia I was always reminded of Philip Larkin. This is because there is a road sign for Dockery Road and one of Larkin's best and most characteristically pessimistic poems is called "Dockery and Son". It ends:

*Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age.*

One of the books I was given for Christmas is by Roger Scruton and called "*The Uses of Pessimism and the Danger of False Hope*". Apparently it argues that *the greatest harm and havoc has been wrought on the world by those who have presented themselves as optimists and idealists, whether of the Left or of the Right. The time has come to replace irrational exuberance with humane pessimism!* I look forward with great optimism to reading it.

Apparently one of Larkin's most favoured aphorisms was: "*Life is so flat that you can see your own tombstone at the other end.*"

### **Created to pretend we never die**

Faith is dismissed by some of those who do not possess it, as merely a response to the fear of death. Philip Larkin says as much in his bleak poem "Aubade". He dismisses Christianity as a "*vast moth-eaten musical brocade created to pretend we never die*".

Though beautifully put this is nonsense. Anyone with a passing knowledge of the Old Testament should be aware that for centuries the ancient Hebrews clung to their belief in a good and just God without any hope of an afterlife worthy of the name.

In pre-exilic and early post-exilic Judaism, the dead, both good and bad alike, descend to "Sheol". There they endure forever a shadowy semi-existence dreaded by all. As the Jewish Encyclopaedia puts it, there... "*the dead merely exist without knowledge or feeling (Job 14<sup>13</sup>; Ecclesiastes 9<sup>5</sup>). Silence reigns supreme; and oblivion is the lot of them that*

enter therein (Psalms 88<sup>13</sup> and 94<sup>17</sup>; Ecclesiastes 9<sup>10</sup>). Hence it is known also as “Dumah,” the abode of silence (Psalms 6<sup>6</sup>, 30<sup>10</sup>, 94<sup>7</sup>, 95<sup>17</sup>). That these ancient folk, living in so brutal, harsh, violent and arbitrary world should cling to belief in a good God without any hope of eternal reward is astonishing.

Belief in a heavenly afterlife and eternal rewards evolved later. Our faith and belief cannot be dismissed as merely a response to fear of death. Most of us would express our belief in words like these:

### **To Christ on the Cross**

*I am not moved to love you, Lord, to gain  
the heaven you have promised in return.  
And God, what moves me never to complain  
is not the fear of hell where sinners burn.*

*You move me, Lord. It moves me when I see  
they mock you as you draw your dying breath.  
I'm moved before your body's injury.  
I'm moved by what you suffered, by your death.*

*At length what moves me is your love, and thus,  
if heaven were not real, I'd still love you;  
if hell untrue, I'd fear you nonetheless.*

*You owe me nothing for loving you like this,  
since if I did not hope for what I do,  
I'd love you, Lord, with equal tenderness.*

Miguel de Guevara (1585-1646)  
translated from the Spanish by Robert Schechter

### **(18) “This and That” - Sunday 29 December, 2013**

At Midnight Mass, as I am used to it, the Celebrant carries the baby Jesus up to the manger under the high altar during the first hymn. After two verses of the hymn there is a pause during which he reverently places the bambino in the manger. He then says a prayer of blessing over the crib and once the hymn is resumed he censes and sprinkles the little fellow, the crib and the altar, before moving on to his seat.

#### **The baby**

One year, with too much to think about before the service began, I forgot the little Jesus. I left him behind in the priest's vestry. I had to scuttle back to find him.

Far worse than this little faux pas, however, was a Christmas Eve morning, seven or eight years ago, when the baby Jesus was dropped. His left arm was irreparably shattered into many pieces. The Rector of the parish, myself, panicked. What can we do I wondered? All the children at the Crib Service will notice that baby Jesus has a grievously injured arm. It will be what they remember above all else of this year's Christmas! My wife's response was more imaginative. One look at the babe's shattered arm and she saw the remedy. She took him off and returned him beautifully and tightly

bound in swaddling clothes. Neither arm was visible any more. All was well. To this day that bambino sleeps each Christmas peacefully swaddled.

### **Swaddled**

At the various school carol services I have attended, all the readings have been from the Good News Bible. This is probably a very good thing. It is more readily understandable than any other version, but I do not like it. I call it the “four letter word bible”. The baby Jesus in that translation is wrapped not in swaddling clothes but “in strips of cloth”. Oh dear, dear, dear!

There is a paradox here. In stripping language down to make its meaning clear, we can rob it of three quarters of its meaning. We are enabled to understand it just because there is so little left to understand!

Some modern translations dish up the bible so baldly and so devoid of any ambiguity, nuance, subtlety, mystery or beauty that there is hardly any truth left to believe. Truth, unlike the Reverend Canon Andrew David Irwin Neaum, can never really be itself when bald. Diana and I for our enjoyable Book of Common Prayer saying of morning and evening Prayer each day use the King James Bible. The undoubted problem of not infrequent obscurity is more than offset by the delight of euphony and rhythm.

### **Asafoetida**

I am in the process of learning to enjoy yet another bible. Someone gave me for my birthday “The Curry Bible”. It is a splendid book that is spicing up our lives enormously, as indeed a bible should.

I have long cherished a desire to use asafoetida in my cooking and am at last doing so. It is a dried latex exuded by the tap root of several species of a perennial herb native to the mountains of Afghanistan. It has a foetid smell, but used sparingly in cooked dishes delivers a smooth flavour not dissimilar to leeks. Other names are “stinking gum”, “goats dung”, “Devil’s dung”, “food of the gods”, “hing” and “ting”. Irresistible!

### **(17) “This and That” - Sunday 22 December, 2013**

Over indulgence is not the most dangerous temptation at Christmas. Rather it is to dismiss the lovely Gospel stories that so imaginatively and inexhaustibly reveal the momentous meaning of Christmas as absurd and childish fairy tales. To which I say: Pshaw! Bah! Tush!

### **Pshaw! Bah! Tush!**

To so dismiss them is like taking your beloved out to a candle-lit dinner and instead of dreamily dwelling upon her loveliness, reminding yourself that her beautiful face is really no more than multiple layers of ectodermal tissue and hair follicles protective of underlying veins, muscles and ligaments. To which I say again: Pshaw! Bah! Tush!

The political theorist and thinker, Hannah Arendt once said that *story telling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it*. So at Christmas we rejoice in the stories and revel in their inexhaustible, suggestive meanings and profound truths.

### **The best company**

*"Hearts that are delicate and kind and tongues that are neither....make the finest company,"* said the essayist Logan Pearsall Smith

I know exactly what he means. Company and conversation that is too delicate, considerate and politically correct is vapid and dull. Just as humour, if it is really to sparkle, needs to flirt with the unacceptable, so conversation needs a strong dash of gossip and superficial malice if it is to stimulate and fizz. Only superficially malicious though. Undergirding it all there has to be a deep rooted kindness and charity.

Too often gossip is a crude and cruel form of one upmanship. If we know something about someone else that others do not, we can feel superior as we pass it on. Our ego is momentarily boosted because everyone is listening to us. It is a sign that we are usually not very interesting people.

### **Were I Lord God**

I am reading a novel called *David Elginbrod*. It was written by George MacDonald who lived from 1824 to 1905. As well as being a novelist and poet he was a Congregationalist minister. His most famous and influential writings are fairy tales (*The Light Princess, The Golden Key, The Wise Woman*) and fantasy novels (*Phantastes, The Princess and the Goblin, At the Back of the North Wind*). He was highly regarded by W H Auden, E. Nesbit, Lewis Carroll, G K Chesterton and many others. C S Lewis regarded him as his spiritual father and master.

*David Elginbrod* is a sort of gothic romance and except that some of it is written in a broad and difficult Scottish dialect it is an excellent read. The germ of the novel was apparently an epitaph that MacDonald heard recited at a dinner party and which is discussed in the novel:

*Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde:  
Hae mercy o' my soul, Lord God;  
As I wad do, were I Lord God,  
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde.*

MacDonald is a wise, devout and well read scholar. I find his theology attractive. He was a universalist, believing that no one will be damned because God's love will triumph universally. He also rejected the doctrine of "penal substitutionary atonement", teaching instead that Christ had come to save people from their sins, rather than from a Divine penalty for their sins. This chimes sweetly with another of my favourite aphorisms: "We are punished not for our sins, but by them". How lovely it is to find a kindred spirit.



**(16) "This and That" - Sunday 15 December, 2013**

I have lived in sixteen vicarages, rectories, mission houses or church houses since being born into one. All but two of them were lovely and those that were not were more than tolerable.

**Murder**

The Rectory in my last parish was most pleasing and but a few yards from the very lovely parish church. I trod those few yards innumerable times each day, in summer usually in bare feet. Between the two buildings was a large and very lovely white mulberry tree. It provided beautiful shade in the hot summer and allowed welcome sunshine into my spacious study in winter. It also attracted flocks of one of the most beautiful of all Australian parrots, the rainbow lorikeet, as well as a multitude of other birds. At night time it was visited by great and noisy fruit bats who dropped upon nocturnal visitors or passers by not only fruit but also more dubious and noxious fluids. To watch them against a moonlit sky, as they beat their leathery wings was unforgettable. I loved that tree.



*Rainbow Lorikeets © Jessowey*

Not long after we left, the parish murdered it, took it down, it is no more. Most grievous, but it was not my house, on leaving one has to let go. My previous parish to that one had a front garden graced by the loveliest of crab apple trees. In spring it was a truly splendid sight and its shade during summer in so hot a climate was a most welcome boon.

Not long after we left, the parish murdered it, took it down, it is no more. Most grievous, but it was not my house, on leaving one has to let go.

**Mandela - good fella**

Piqued at all the pork-barrelling before an election in Australia some years ago, I wrote a silly little quatrain referring to Nelson Mandela:

*Our frightful Australian politicians  
Might turn out as fine as Mandela  
If we locked up the blackguards for 23 years  
In a bleak island's dungeon or cellar.*

Mandela was an intriguing and pleasing personality, by all accounts. His greatest achievement of all, however, was to bring into an impossible situation that unpredictable, circuit-breaker that we call "forgiveness". A virtue that lies at the very heart of Jesus of Nazareth's teaching and of our faith. Hannah Arendt once wrote: "*In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which, because of the irreversibility of the action process, can be expected, and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action.*"

O for a Mandela like circuit breaker in Syria, Palestine and North Korea.

**Samuel Johnson - good fella**

AN Wilson in a recent article tells us that great Dr Samuel Johnson was once asked by a prig "*What signifies giving halfpence to beggars? They only lay it out in gin or tobacco.*" Johnson spoke for Liberty and England when he trenchantly replied: "*And why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence? It is surely very savage to*

*refuse them every possible avenue to pleasure reckoned too coarse for our own acceptance. Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding.”* Dr Samuel Johnson was one of the very finest and interesting of Englishmen and Anglicans. May he rest in peace.

**(15) “This and That” - Sunday 8 December, 2013**

How lovely this year's lingering autumn. In front of the Vicarage on still and frosty mornings, showers of sunlit, yellow-brown oak leaves, idly spinning, drift gently down to greet the gravel audibly. As I write the oak trees are still half-leafed, but the poplar trees to the west of the garden are now leafless, silhouetted tracery, bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

**An anthem for atheists**

For many of us the bleakest moments of the day are those between waking up and getting up. This was certainly so for the non-believing, pessimistic curmudgeon of a poet Phillip Larkin. He wrote one of the twentieth century's most despairing poems, a brilliant but hopeless atheist's funeral hymn and de profundis. Called "*Aubade*" it begins:

*I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what's really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.....*

Unlike for Larkin, it takes only a hot shower, a cup of coffee, a leisurely Mattins said with Diana and a bowl of porridge drenched in maple syrup to dissipate my gloom and fill me with anticipation for the day ahead. Thank God for the Christian tradition and all its beauty, joy and hope. I wouldn't be an atheist for quids.

**An anticlimactic climax**

Last Sunday morning I listened to a program on Radio 4 called "*Something Understood*". It was all to do with Advent, a glorious mixture of music, poetry, prose and reflection, broad of sympathies, wide of cultural reference and thought provoking.

The program's title is a quotation from George Herbert's poem "*Prayer*", my very favourite poem. Far more than a quotation, the two words are the anticlimactic climax of an astonishing, single sentence sonnet. The whole poem is a cascade of astonishing images depicting prayer. Every single one of them I find myself saying "yes, yes, yes" to.

There are twenty six of these glorious, paradoxical, exotic images that capture, define and characterise prayer. To end the list and close the sonnet there is the splendid extraordinary ordinariness of prayer being simply "*something understood*."

*Prayer* says Herbert..... *the Churches banquet, Angels age, Gods breath in man returning to his birth, the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage, the Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth; engine against th' Almighty, sinner's towre, reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear, the six-daies world transposing in an houre, a kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear; softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,*

*exalted Manna, gladness of the best, heaven in ordinarie, man well drest, the milkie way, the bird of Paradise, church-bells beyond the stars heard, the souls blood, the land of spices; something understood.*

### **Stress and pressure**

The attractive old reprobate Jeffery Bernard once said that the *"successful should thank their lucky stars that they can experience stress and pressure, two things that prevent life from becoming a coma that lasts, on average, 70 years. Skating on thin ice is a far better exercise than jogging...."*

### **(14) "This and That" - Sunday 1 December, 2013**

I like to be showered, dressed and in the kitchen by two minutes to six in the morning to hear "Tweet of the Day". The program is a mere ninety seconds in length, but they are the very best of seconds. A program so short is eccentric and peculiarly English. It is one of reasons that Radio 4 is dear to my heart.

### **Godwits and Wolves**

Monday's episode last week was about the Black-tailed Godwit. As always it was fascinating, informative and gave examples of the bird's call. In medieval times these large, beautiful waders were considered good eating and so were termed "good wights", hence its name. (*Wight* is Middle English for a creature or person.)

I am thinking of christening the Vicarage "Wolf Hall". Not because I enjoyed reading Hilary Mantel's huge tome of that title, though I did, but because the Vicarage burglar alarm is always crying "Wolf". It regularly and frequently sounds off for no apparent reason.

### **George Carey and AN Wilson**

The most interesting response to George Carey's widely reported suggestion that the Church of England faces extinction in a generation's time came from A. N. Wilson in the Telegraph. Wilson is a favourite of mine, clever, controversial, acidulous and witty. He had an overwhelming "born again" conversion experience nearly twenty five years ago, but to atheism. Such a relief was it to discard the Christian faith that for months afterwards, he writes, "I walked on air". As an unbeliever he was articulate and combative, but then in 2009 he published in *The New Statesman* a moving and fascinating account of his rediscovery of faith, saying "..... My departure from the Faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus. My return was slow, hesitant, doubting. So it will always be; but I know I shall never make the same mistake again....."

### **Poets Corner**

Another favourite writer and Christian is C S Lewis. He too has been in the news for being honoured with a memorial in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey. Lewis has helped persuade thousands of people of the essential truth of Christianity and his Narnia books baptized the imagination of one of my own daughters. A N Wilson claims that far from convincing him, Lewis contributed to his conversion to atheism. Lewis' sinewy rationality and certitude were far too confident, emphatic and unsubtle for the likes of Wilson. I can see what he means, but I still love Lewis. His *Screwtape Letters* were recently Radio 4's *Book of the Week*. Splendidly apposite, seventy years after being published.

Lewis does still arouse strong emotions in people though. The highly regarded children's author and atheist, Philip Pullman, loathes Lewis, especially his children's books. To each his taste. My delight in Lewis's recent honour is heightened by the thought of Phillip Pullman's inevitable discomfiture at it.

Ironically Lewis is not considered much of a poet, which in no way deters me from liking many of his poems. A fine one called "*Love's as Warm as Tears*" was sung at the dedication of his memorial in Westminster Abbey. I also find the following little epigram irresistible:

*All things (for example a camel's journey through  
a needle's eye) are possible, it's true;  
But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out  
In one long bloody thread from tail to snout.*

### **(13) "This and That" - Sunday 24 November, 2013**

Among the very greatest of my life's innumerable little pleasures is an early morning shower, the hotter the better. It is a daily baptism, a rebirth, a transition from darkness to light. The night's dark thoughts, as well as any of early morning's slugabed angst are washed away. The devil gurgles down the plug hole. As I soap, rinse and scald, my mind snaps into creativity. I interrogate myself and converse with myself and pessimism turns to optimism. I emerge renewed and born again. The day lies open before me, alive with possibilities.

#### **Another great little pleasure**

Another of life's great little pleasures is immersion in a good book. Total immersion, and so again easily likened to baptism. I enter and lose myself in another world, preferably one where truth, goodness and love abide to tantalise and fascinate. The very Kingdom of God.

I learned from my daughter over the weekend that an excellent biography of Vernon Scannell has just been published. He is a favourite of mine, a fascinatingly complex and extremely troubled spirit, an army deserter, semi-professional pugilist, prone to outburst's of violence and yet a truly excellent poet with a big heart. I can hardly wait to read it. As it was my birthday last weekend my daughter is giving the book to me as a present. There is also a new biography of J S Bach, recently published and well reviewed. It is by John Eliot Gardiner. I intend persuading the local library to acquire a copy for me to borrow.

#### **Gobble, gobble**

I am a fast reader. This is a mixed blessing for although it enables me to devour books at a great rate, I don't really digest them thoroughly. The pleasure tends to lie more in the immediacy of gobbling them down than in any long term retention of intellectual nourishment. This reminds me of a story my father used to tell about when he was a boy. Just before Christmas he walked past one of the old workhouses in his Derbyshire home town. It happened to be the inmates' annual Christmas dinner. The poor old fellows were so unfamiliar with the taste and sensation of good and rich fare sliding down their oesophagus, some of them, having filled their belly, shuffled outside to put a finger down their throat to vomit the meal up. This allowed them to rush back inside to repeat the pleasure of a second or even third meal.

## Iconoclasm

Last Saturday we visited the Tate Britain to see the exhibition “*Art Under Attack (Histories of British Iconoclasm)*”. The first two parts dealt with religion and the attempt by radical Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to purge our churches of all their statuary and stained glass images. The second Commandment: *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image.....* was taken to demand the total destruction of all religious images in churches. Only the words of the Bible were to be displayed. Having recently listened to a talk on the origins of our alphabet, however, it was easy for me to see a great irony in this. The letters of the alphabet, not unlike ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, were originally actually pictures themselves. Letters and words are no less symbols and images than are paintings, statues and stained glass.

## Devout unbelievers

Hilaire Belloc's wife Elodie used to place a crucifix over every low door-lintel in their ancient house. This, she said, was to force her husband's unbelieving visitor friends to bow to our Lord. Splendid woman.

## (12) “This and That” - Sunday 17 November, 2013

Being a wise husband I not infrequently pay compliments to Diana. Whenever I do this with an excess of extravagance or wit, I wisely suffix my praise with the light-hearted and ironic comment: “Oh he can pass a pretty compliment.” Humour is useful. It takes sentimentality’s saccharine out of praise, defuses anger and deflates pomposity and pretentiousness.

## Moles

The moles in our lawn have been active. They shovel up mountains of earth not mere hills. I could never bring myself to harm a mole. This is thanks to “*The Wind in the Willows*” which my father read to me and my brother and sister when we were children, garnering as much pleasure from it as we did. In conversation he used the pleasing term “mouldywarp” for moles. So whenever I hear the word “mole” the term “mouldywarp” springs to mind. He probably got the term from Alison Uttley’s children’s book “*Moldy Warp the Mole,*” but a little research reveals the word to be an archaic term for moles with cognates in German, Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic. The “mouldy” bit refers to “dirt” and the “warp bit refers to “throw” or “toss”. The mole or mouldywarp is a “*dirt tosser*” then, and I can now add to my vocabulary of insults the term “mouldywarp” for purveyors of porn and filth! However, it is too lovely a word to be associated with such unpleasant human beings.

The Anglican priest and poet Andrew Young wrote a little gem of a verse about a dead mole (he also wrote a longer one commending idleness which I love beyond telling. It is bound to feature in a sermon or article eventually, as too is a little miracle of a poem on resurrection of the body. Here though is

### The Dead Mole

Strong shouldered mole,  
That so much lived below the ground,  
Dug, fought and loved, hunted and fed,  
For you to raise a mound  
Was as for us to make a hole;

What wonder now that being dead  
Your body lies here, stout and square  
Buried within the blue vault of the air?

#### **A new aphorism**

I came upon an interesting aphorism from George Bernard Shaw last week. It challenged my long held conviction that it is invariably necessary in life to compromise with the inevitable rather than hopelessly to resist it. A conviction that is fair enough so long as what is inevitable can be satisfactorily discerned from what is not, wherein lies the rub.

My favourite example of the soundness of this conviction is the case of Rhodesia under its Prime Minister in the nineteen sixties, Ian Smith. He hopelessly attempted, King Canute-like, to turn back the tide of black nationalism, even after the Portuguese regime in Moçambique had fallen. Had he and his government compromised earlier with black nationalism, instead of stupidly pressing on to resist it, a far happier outcome for that now miserable nation might well have been negotiated.

Shaw's aphorism does give me pause for thought though: "*The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.*" It is an example of the great dialectic. Every truth appears to have an opposite truth!

#### **(11) "This and That" - Sunday 10 November, 2013**

Among the delights we've discovered in the Vicarage is a two pronged pitch fork. As well as being a symbol of rural rebellion, it is also a splendidly useful implement for lifting and carrying great piles of cut bramble. The lovely curve of its two tines, like that of the sickle and scythe is perfect. It is a perfection achieved and honed from centuries of expert use, just as the perfection of folk melodies like "*The Ash Grove*" or "*O Waly Waly*" is a pared down polished beauty acquired from centuries of loving domestic music making.

#### **A feathered fragment**

Another unusual Vicarage delight is a powerful electric chainsaw. Some days ago we built ourselves a saw bench to enable us to use it safely to saw the branches and logs that litter the treed boundaries of our garden. Last week, after sawing our way through a great pile of logs, I walked into the kitchen as dusk fell. Standing there for a moment I felt something move behind my neck. I assumed it to be a spider or wood louse and so flicked at it casually and then made my way to the study. Then Diana called me back to the kitchen to see a little blue tit standing on a recipe book. I am flattered to think that it had taken refuge on my shoulder because it mistook me for St Francis, and that finding me a comfortable perch, it stayed put even when I entered the house. We photographed the lovely little feathered fragment of a fellow and then released it outside.



#### **Remembrance Day**

Every day is a Remembrance Day to the likes of me, so chronic a nostalgic am I. Imaginatively footling about where once I used to be is a major indulgence. It is more than an indulgence though. The past, remembered and recalled, helps define who I am.

We can't think, converse or even know without remembering. Unless we are able to remember the beginning of a sentence when we come to its end, the sentence can make no sense to us. Its verb has no subject to act upon its object, for we've forgotten it.

So too with life. If we have no sense of history or appreciation of what's gone before, the present is senseless. Today can only be seen, known and understood for what it is, in contrast to and as a consequence of yesterday. Today is the penultimate phrase of a very, very long sentence. Remembrance Day is important to us at all sorts of levels and in all sorts of ways.

### **Chronological snobbery**

To recite, in daily Morning and Evening Prayer, several of Coverdale's psalms as well as two readings from the Authorised Version of the Bible, helps preserve us from chronological snobbery. That is, from condescending to the ancient world as if our present world is inherently superior. It is not. The barbaric BC world of the Old Testament, though very distant and different is also very near and like our world. It is easy to enter into imaginatively and empathetically. So too the New Testament world of Jesus of Nazareth. Coverdale's sixteenth century poetry and the Authorised Version's seventeenth century prose even go so far as to suggest that in mellifluous beauty and precision of expression our present century is inferior. Broadness of sympathy is required backwards in time as well as in the present. Not only should we love our neighbour as ourselves, but also past centuries as our own.

### **(10) "This and That" - Sunday 3 November, 2013**

We awoke last Sunday in Sherston, a village in the north west corner of Wiltshire. The view from our bedroom window was over a maze of mossy, tiled roofs to the tall sunlit tower of a fine, local parish church. It gladdened our hearts. The tower's Cotswold stone glowed and gleamed as a wild wind gathered itself together for a tempestuous twenty four hours of storminess. Flocks of jackdaws soared and swooped as leaves whipped from autumnal trees sailed across the village.

### **Bells and homiletic logorrhea**

Later the tower's bells, one of England's loveliest sounds, called us to Eucharist. On entering the church Diana led the way up the tower where she rang a round with friendly ringers in its sunlit belfry. The service afterwards was peaceful, if a bit fumbling of execution. The sermon was excellent. When on holiday and in a strange church, I always look forward to the sermon. I am usually disappointed, not so last Sunday.

Bad sermons are more the rule than the exception I am sorry to say. One major fault is "homiletic logorrhea" best defined as "he preached more than he had to say". A Frenchman once skewered another common failing thus: "Improve you style monsieur! You have disgusted me with the joys of heaven."

The preacher in Sherston used an interesting analogy in relation to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. It helped make the point that being right and good is not necessarily enough. The pharisees were both and yet condemned. Being good, said the very elderly preacher, can be compared to a path. Jesus, the epitome of goodness, stands at one end, the devil, the epitome of evil, at the other. The pharisees, with many upright and law-abiding people are well along the path, close to the Jesus end. However they have

their backs to him. The publicans and many of the notoriously sinful are not far long the path at all, are much closer to the devil's end, but they are full face to Jesus. I found this illuminating.

We arrived home just in time for Evensong as the great storm gathered force. We had seen some glorious, soaring churches on our few days jaunt away, but it was good to be back in the more subtle and lowly loveliness and warmth of St John's as the trees outside seethed and groaned in the wind, littering the lanes with arboreal debris. I love wild weather. The next day there were 55 millimetres of rain in my gauge. Over two inches.

### **In a country churchyard**

After five funerals in a couple of weeks I now feel I can relax into the English way of doing them. I enjoy particularly the lugubrious expertise of the pall bearers. I wonder if there is a degree offered in this ancient art. So studied is their gloom of countenance it is comical and their footwork as they make the necessary turn before exiting with a coffin is intricately terpsichorean and neat. The long, measured walk through so lovely a graveyard to the grave took me back to reread that most lovely of English poems: Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Our tower is not "ivy mantled" and there are now no elms to walk beneath, but the poem's sentiments fit our churchyard beautifully nonetheless. I am grateful to have been sent back to reread it.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

### **(9) "This and That" - Sunday 27 October, 2013**

I looked after a parish in Dundee for three months in 2000 and loved it. Dundee is the home of the "worst poet in the English language," William McGonagall. Did he write this or is it a splendid Spike Milliganesque misattribution:

A chicken is a noble beast,  
The cow is much forlorn;  
Standing in the pouring rain,  
With a leg at every corner.

### **Appreciated Atheism**

Samuel Beckett, a lugubrious writer of sombre, pessimistic plays that are exciting for the most part only to intellectuals and would be intellectuals, did say a few fascinating things. One of them was: "God doesn't exist, the bastard!" That is the sort of atheism I appreciate. If God doesn't exist he ought to. Faith, belief and church as I have known and experienced them are beautiful. If for any reason I had to give them away it would break my heart. Antagonistic and critical atheism on the other hand I find it difficult to fathom. How can anyone hate something I know to be so lovely?

### **Rest in Peace**

One of the melancholy accompaniments of getting older is the death of old friends and heroes. It is a good few years now since the death of one of my very favourite poets, Charles Causley. In my last parish I read through his collected works in the chapel each morning, a poem or two a day. A wonderful, richly imaged and Christian world, full of Cornwall and the sea. Another favourite, Vernon Scannell, a drifter, boxer and certainly



no Christian, died a few years later, so another old friend now no more. Here is one of his poems I love:

### Love

Is it like a carnival with spangles and balloons,  
Fancy-dress and comic masks and sun-drenched afternoons  
Without a cloud to spoil the blue perfection of the skies?  
*"Well yes, at first, but later on it might seem otherwise."*

Is it like a summer night when stock and roses stain  
The silken dark with fragrance and the nightingale again  
Sweetly pierces silence with its silver blades of song?  
*"I say once more it can be thus, but not for very long."*

Is it like a great parade with drums and marching feet  
And everybody cheering them, and dancing in the street,  
With laughter swirling all around and only tears of joy?  
*"If that alone, you'd find the fun would soon begin to cloy."*

Is it like the falling snow, noiseless through the night;  
Mysterious as moonlight and innocent and bright,  
Changing the familiar world with its hypnotic spell?  
*"It has been known to be like that, and other things as well.  
"But if you find, when all the brightest ribbons have grown frayed  
The colours faded, music dumb, and all that great parade  
Dismissed into the darkness where the moon has been put out,  
Together you find warmth and strength, then that's what it's about."*

### (8) "This and That" Sunday 20 October, 2013

Diana and I consider the bicycle to be one of humankind's greatest inventions. Few sights are more pleasing to us than stacks and stacks of bicycles parked outside buildings and in streets. The resurgence in bike riding over the past twenty or thirty years gives us great joy. It also provides a metaphor of hope for church people.

It is easy to despair of churches half or three quarters empty and of the absence of the young. The churches of our youth, we like to think, were full of folk of all ages. If that was ever really true, it is not so now.

Take heart from the humble bicycle. In our youth the streets outside the factories were full of them. They were stacked against the walls, hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds. Everyone, it seemed, went to work on one. They were also widely used for leisure and for courting, if Betjeman is anything to go by. In his amusing poem "Senex" he is an old man observing in anguish young, courting biking girls:

<i>To see the golden hiking girl</i>	<i>At sundown on my tricycle</i>
<i>With wind about her hair,</i>	<i>I tour the Boroughs edge,</i>
<i>The tennis-playing, biking girl,</i>	<i>And icy as an icicle</i>
<i>The wholly-to-my-liking girl,</i>	<i>See bicycle by bicycle</i>
<i>To see and not to care.</i>	<i>Stacked waiting in the hedge.</i>

The advent of mass produced motor cars and improving living standards seemed to presage the end of the bicycle. Their use steeply declined, everyone aspired to a car. It seemed as though the bicycle was doomed. Not so though, bikes are back in fashion again. Many people in great cities, young and old, head for work on a bicycle to avoid congestion, to be environmentally responsible, for ease of parking, for the sake of health and fitness and to avoid the cost of public transport. Numbers can wax as well as wane, are not everything.

To allow anxiety about the numbers attending church dictate too much what we do, is probably as dangerous as politicians allowing opinion polls to dictate policy. A wise bishop once said to me, "don't be too concerned about numbers, we are called to feed the sheep not count them." It is the quality of the food we provide that is all important. If it is good and nourishing there will always be some folk wise enough to partake.

### **Rule of Life**

The formulation of a diocesan "rule of life" is one of the heartening proposals to come out of the recent Winchester Diocesan Conference. Our faith needs domesticating, that is, taking with us out of church into our homes. The Jews, the Moslems, the Greek Orthodox all appear better at this than we Anglicans. Enshrined and candle lit icons in the home, homely little rituals, rites and ceremonies that encourage each other and open our hearts to God each day are lovely. Diana and I say matins together every morning before breakfast. We use the old rite and love it. We comment on difficulties, oddities and delights encountered in the psalms and readings, we share our thoughts about this and that, and at the end always pray by name for our children and loved ones.

A diocesan "rule of life" will include more than just a daily rite. It will involve action and good works as well. Though to be widely embraced it will need to be accessible to all, not too complicated or ambitious and be life-enhancing. I am sure it will be all of this. How wonderful to be united on a diocesan scale in the domestication, in the bringing to our hearts, hearths, homes and whole lives the practice of our faith.

### **(6 &7) "This and That" Sunday 13 October, 2013**

Diana and I visited two abbeys last week. The first was Lee Abbey in north Devon. We went there for a weekend of spiritual refreshment, along with nearly ninety church folk from Boldre, Brockenhurst and Sway. It is an impressive, comfortable, commodious and largely Victorian building in an incomparable setting. It overlooks green meadows, steep cliffs and the sea and it farms nearly 300 acres of its own land. It was a beautiful place to be.

The Abbey is home to a vibrant evangelical Christian community, with an emphasis upon the young. Its members are made up, for the most part, of gap year students from all over the world. They live, work and worship together, most of them for a year, hosting a variety of guests for conferences, retreats, workshops and quiet times. A beautiful place among lovely people, I found it challenging. It is so very, very different in atmosphere, style, churchmanship and theology from what I am familiar or comfortable with. It was good for me.

On the way back, as the late evening sun dropped down over beautiful Dorset farmland, we stopped at Sherborne Abbey. Diana wished to see the great west window by John Hayward, I to reacquaint myself with what I remembered as being one of the finest parish churches I have ever visited. Neither of us were disappointed. As we lingered and sauntered around the building, the sound of the choir practising for Evensong drifted into, round and through the pillars and arches. I was challenged in a different way. To dissolve, melt, lose myself in the beauty of God, faith and tradition.

Thank God that the Anglican Church is a broad church. There is a vibrancy and heartening vigour about our Church's evangelical expressions. The guitars, drums, songs, testimonies and giving of one's life to Jesus attract many to faith and church and fills pews. It is a movement as much needed in a failing and floundering Church as was Wesleyism in the eighteenth century. We all need to acknowledge its validity and sincerity and the likelihood of it helping to reinvigorate the church in dire times. All the more so if, like Diana and myself, we do not respond easily to it. We tried to work out why we don't as we drove home.

It was a weekday Westminster Abbey Evensong that helped break my heart open for God. It is doubt not certainty that best characterises my faith. It is God hidden in the bread and wine of ordinariness, and yet intimated in sacraments that I reach out for and love. God elusive not obvious. It is God mediated by the great and ancient musical tradition that moves me to genuflect. God expressed in the opening phrase of Bach's B Minor Mass, in the glorious complexity of Tallis' Spem in Alium, in the words of Cranmer's "Collect for Peace", all of which open the gates of heaven to me. For me even Christian community and fellowship is more easily and deeply felt if it is not so much "in your face" as allowed to arise and emerge from a common focus, from looking together in the same direction rather than into each other's faces. Objectivity more than subjectivity, nearness in distance, truth in paradox.

This is not so for most people. Diana, myself and probably most of the readers of this pew-sheet inhabit a cultural world that is tiny and different from that of most people in our land. Jesus was incarnated into the whole, wide world though. He speaks in the language of all cultures. To be true to him and to his Gospel we have to be broad in our sympathies and culturally wide rather than narrow. The authentic Jesus walks everywhere, speaking and singing in the language and cultures of all.

### **(5) "This and That" - Sunday 6 October, 2013**

I mowed the Vicarage back lawn on Tuesday. A strenuous job given the slope and the roughness of the ground. No matter, lawn mowing is a favourite occupation. Primarily because the results are satisfyingly immediate and obvious, unlike with so much parish priesting. For the next few days I can wander out to the back of the Vicarage and view the results of my handiwork with pleasurable self-satisfaction. I also love the sweet scent of mown, sun-fermenting grass sap combined with petrol fumes, it is intoxicating. Literally, for the latter is certainly toxic. An intriguing cocktail of scents comparable to a drink cocktail of elder flower cordial and the crudest of crude absinthes. Knockout!

A group of us are away this week being spiritually refreshed and stimulated at Lee Abbey in north Devon with folk from Brockenhurst and Sway. Many thanks to Chris and Tatiana for taking Mattins at St John's. On the 27th of October Frank Willet has

graciously and most happily agreed to take both the 8.00am at Pilley and the 10.30am at St John's as Diana and I will be away one more.

### **Grace: Harvest Supper 2013**

Dear Lord, it would be very wrong  
To make your people sit too long  
With lengthy prayers of gratitude  
While waiting for their Harvest food  
Long, involved and wordy graces  
Tend to bring on gloomy faces,  
As people view with longing eye  
A too fast cooling cottage pie  
And bellies groan and spirits tumble  
At long held over apple crumble.  
And so to your as well our relief  
My thanks are short, my grace is brief.  
Thank you Lord for harvest cheer,  
For cider, wine and foaming beer  
For apples, plums, potatoes, beans  
Cauliflowers and aubergines,  
For marrows, damsons, nuts galore  
For fields of wheat and so much more,  
For happy fellowship and food,  
For joyful atmosphere and mood,  
Thank you too for this our parish  
For all the care and love you lavish  
On its several congregations  
Who worship you at two locations  
For harvest blessings by the score;  
For Jesus Christ, whom we adore,  
For love that moves the heavenly spheres  
Makes sense of life, non-sense of fears;  
That lightens burdens, tempers loss,  
A love expressed upon the cross.  
For all of this, our hearts we raise  
In joyful gratitude and praise. Amen.

#### **(4) "This and That" - Sunday 29 September, 2013**

The beauty of St John the Baptist's Boldre is unusual for being so unpretentious. The building shows no evidence of having been built to impress, or to make a statement or an impact. Rather, there is a modesty, humility, even a homeliness about it. It doesn't soar up into the sky and dominate the landscape, rather it belongs, fits into and is a part of the landscape. It has not been imposed, it has grown into being here over centuries.

The tower is almost too squat, its walls are a mixture and in places a real hodge-podge of dressed stone, rubble, flint and brick. The deeply worn step down into the

building from the ancient porch is into a quiet, relatively low-roofed loveliness that is more domestic than public. One senses immediately that it has been spiritual home to thousands of good folk for hundreds and hundreds of years, a place "where prayer has been valid." I love it.

Its setting is incomparable, England at its greenest and fairest. Leafy woods, a lovely, well tended and astonishingly extensive graveyard and pleasing meadows. Standing out on its own in the countryside as it does, rather than as the centre and focal point of a particular village and community, it can claim more easily than most parish churches to be home to all and sundry, irrespective of borders, boundaries and limits. It cries out, as all churches should, to be church and home of all.

It was a joy to lead Evensong there last Sunday. On a cold afternoon in February, forty two years ago, I was ushered into the choir stalls of Westminster Abbey to hear Evensong sung perfectly. So overcome was I by its ordered beauty, it played a part in the opening up of my soul to the call to ordination. The psalm the choir sang was "Fret not thyself because of the ungodly...." Indeed, indeed.

Coverdale's psalter I love beyond telling. When home from boarding school at our bush mission station in Rhodesia, we were encouraged to say Matins and Evensong together daily as a family. Often it bored me witless and I participated primarily to please my parents, but its music entered my soul. My mother relished the psalter and especially any unusual or obsolete words or turns of phrase. The phrase, "Sehon king of the Amorites, and Og the king of Bashan..." she would utter with emphatic joy and likewise "let the runagates continue in scarceness". She love the word "tush" in the phrase "tush say they how should God perceive it...." . From the phrase "grin like a dog and run about through the city..." she nick-named a parishioner with a mirthless smile "Grin like a dog."

Although it is against the spirit of the times, my personal preference for liturgy is that it be allowed to flow unimpeded from beginning to end without directional rubrics, interpolations and asides. Each liturgical offering, each church service, is the great river of Christian tradition in miniature. We immerse ourselves in it to be carried along to the end. Our profound communion with each other comes not from regarding each other, addressing each other or taking note of each other, but rather from turning together away from each other towards God.

I have been to church during my lifetime, thousands upon thousands of hours. For many of those hours I have been bored witless. So what. Boredom develops the imagination. For the young these days, with stimulation at the end of every finger for every waking hour, periods of boredom can only be hugely beneficial. We should advertise the Church to parents with the slogan, "for the good of your children bring them to church to be bored." Though of course they could never be bored at St John's!

### (3) **“This and That” - Sunday 22 September, 2013**

Looking down the Vicarage garden from my study window each day (or from the kitchen, dining room, or bedroom windows), I am awed by a massive, variegated, deep-green tsunami of foliage. There is the ancient Bramley apple tree in the foreground, then a mass of hazels and great oak trees. They dominate the view, fill the sky. A

towering wall of vibrant greens, they rise up from below, loom forward and encroach upon the lawn. Misted and softened in gentle rain, they glint and sparkle sunshine and toss and sway wildly in wind. I love them. The greenness is deep enough to drown in.

Windows frame beauty and so help contain and concentrate it, as do artists. In Princeton recently we visited the University Art Gallery with a view to seeing some American art. Of all the paintings I saw there the one that most caught my attention and fired my imagination was by Winslow Homer. It was of a woman in mourning sitting sadly beside an open window that looked out to a world of brightness and gaiety. My favourite Australian painting, a print of which adorned the walls of our Rectory, is by Hans Heysen, a portrait of his wife at her sewing machine. She sits in concentrated peace in front of partly open windows. The bright sunlight, filtered through greenery, dapples the sill and her sewing, it is a celebration of domesticity.

At the heart of my faith and spirituality is a quest for windows. Windows from the ordinary that look out, into and onto the extraordinary. Windows from the mundane into the heavenly, the material into the spiritual, the particular into the universal, the terrestrial into the transcendent. William Blake in that strange amalgam of banality and unutterable beauty that is his poem "Auguries of Innocence" puts it perfectly:

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.*

There is so much more to existence than just flesh and bone, than just quarks, protons, electrons, nuclei, atoms and molecules. The microscope and telescope don't reveal a half of the world's wonder. The material and the physical all point to a greater reality beyond themselves. Imagination, myth, story, poetry, music, human personality, express a reality more real and greater than the material. A mucky, primitive stable and a mewling, puking infant in ancient Bethlehem, breathe truths of the spirit that can only be articulated in artfully naive and lovely stories, but that in fact are more real than reality itself.

The Gospel narratives, provide a window into a reality that takes our breath away. It is a reality in which love lies at the heart of the Divine and is life's very purpose and meaning.

Not literally, but oh so very really, it is Love, as Dante says, which moves the sun and the other stars. Not literally, but oh so very really, the hands that hold us in existence are pierced with unimaginable nails.

## **(2) "This and That" Sunday 15 September, 2013**

We are now members of the local library. Before leaving Australia I got rid of my own library except for two or three hundred books which I have left with Elizabeth my daughter. Any books I now buy go on to my Kindle.

The spur to join the library was a desire to read Roger Scruton's book "*Our Church*". By all accounts this is a deeply flawed effort. It has been severely panned by

critics I trust. Yet it is a book I know I will deeply love. Unfortunately it remains un-Kindled and I can wait no longer.

I love Roger Scruton, he is a genius of the right. His book *"The Face of God"* is a delicate and brilliant account of how it is still possible for a deeply intelligent, rational person tentatively to believe. I love him for it. It is a short gem of a book based on the Gifford Lectures he delivered in 2010. It is by no means easy reading, but I stayed with him all the way, delighted.

I balance my love of Scruton with my love of Terry Eagleton who is a genius of the left and another dazzling, intellectual friend of Faith. Then too there is Francis Spufford whose book *"Unapologetic"* (subtitled: *"Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make Surprising Emotional Sense"*) is an exhilarating read for anyone troubled by neo-atheism. In this book there is a chapter in the middle that gives a very, very moving and credible account of the life of Jesus, truly splendid.

It is odd being semi-retired and having more than one day off a week. I feel guilty to be pottering around in "civvies", picking blackberries, reading, gardening, biking and socialising. I need to join Workaholic's Anonymous.

A spoof letterhead quoted by the historian Diarmid McCullough: *"The Church of England: Loving Jesus with a Slight Air of Superiority Since 597."*

## (1) **"This and That" - Sunday 8 September, 2013**

My very first memories are of a large English country vicarage and lovely garden in Staffordshire. My own narrative's Garden of Eden, from which I was plucked at the age of seven. So in the Vicarage here at Pilley and Boldre, I am back where I began after a lifetime of wandering. "In my end is my beginning". The circle is complete. I returned this time for the first time from the west, rather than backtracking from the east as always heretofore. So my first complete circumnavigation of mother earth home. "It is good Lord to be here."

Many thanks to all who have welcomed us so warmly and generously. The Vicarage is more than fully furnished, it is also happily, comfortably and contentedly inhabited.

The ways of the Church of England in England are a little strange to me. Although born here and indeed selected for training as a priest here, I have never been employed as a clergyman in England. So if I do anything strange, outlandish, unutterably foolish or downright daft, laugh by all means, but don't throw stones. Even this old dog can learn a new trick or two.

As you will learn from today's sermon I believe Christianity, with Jesus of Nazareth as exemplar, enhances life, adds a unique, joyful dimension to it, brings zest, zip and perzazz to human existence. I trust we will enjoy our time together, living our faith fully, exploring it, rejoicing in it and being a truly positive, leavening element in our community.

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