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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (February 2015)



**A little snow man - Vicarage
3 February, 2015**



**A little snow man - Vicarage
4 February, 2015**

*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 **February 2015** 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>

(77) **“This and That” - 22 February, 2015**

We have a new Benefice Administrator. Kay Ashurst takes up her post tomorrow, Monday. She lives in Pilley and is a most amiable, well qualified and capable person.

Thank you Tim

I shall miss Tim though. He is the cleverest Benefice Administrator whose administrations I have ever enjoyed. Our team at the Benefice Quiz night last year came first, thanks to him. He correctly answered far and away the greatest number of questions on our table. His dry, spare wit and quiet, subtle, self-deprecating sense of humour I loved. Still waters run deep. To a wild colonial old boy like me there is something quintessentially and attractively English about him. Thank you Tim.

Most of my life as a parish priest I have had to be my own Office Administrator, or have been in the hands of volunteers. The latter, although they varied in ability and experience were all genial and very much appreciated. In my last and very busy parish in Australia we employed for four days a week an especially lovely woman whose greatest gift was largeness of heart. This stood her in good stead. Her office was attached to the church building and contained a food bank. She handled the many and varied folk who came for help with inexhaustible sensitivity and compassion.

Fairies and slug pellets

Do you wonder if fairies exist? Of course not. God's existence is more than enough to wrestle with. At St Custards School, the wet “cissie” Fotherington-Thomas declared there to be fairies at the bottom of his garden. The dread Nigel Molesworth's brother, Molesworth 2, declared contemptuously that at the bottom of his garden there was just a dirty old rubbish heap. Yes indeed.

There exists here in England, however, a Fairy Investigation Society. First founded in 1927, it continued in existence until just before the Second World War. Its members were believers in fairies and most of them, unsurprisingly, had parallel sympathies with theosophy.

The Society reformed a few years after the war. Walt Disney and Lord Dowding were among its members. It faded out of existence for a second time in the early 1990s, but was revived in 2013.

The old versions of the Society were for those who believed in fairies. The 2013 version is broader of sympathies (like the Anglican Church) and so welcomes anyone interested in fairy-lore, be they believers or sceptics. This year it intends running a ‘fairy census’ of all those who have had fairy experiences.

An article in the Spectator by Tim Stanley brought this unlikely Society to my attention. I was amused by one of his Catholic academic friends who insisted that fairies are demonic. He maintained that the best thing to do if you encounter one is “step on it, or lay down slug pellets.” I wonder if Richard Dawkins believes in fairies.

Look thy last on all things lovely

I have just been out in bright, early morning sunshine, to visit a lady before she went to hospital for a major operation. Our poem for the day, after matins, was de la

Mare's incomparable "*Fare Well*". Its advice on such a glorious day seemed singularly appropriate as I crunched across crisp, frosted grass, avoiding slim crocuses on the verge of opening their hearts to the sun and to the twittering of robins and a great tit's two syllable see saw song:

*Look thy last on all things lovely,
Every hour. Let no night
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
Till to delight
Thou have paid thy utmost blessing...*

Musical sailing

On a visit to Brian Dagnall last week Diana and I learned that his first boat, a fourteen foot dinghy, was made from a piano. Like an Aeolian harp, what sweet music the wind in its sails and rigging must have played. The slow movement of Mozart's Twentieth Piano Concerto perhaps.

(76) "This and That" - 15 February, 2015

Vicarage born and a parish priest now myself, one of the topics of conversation at Sunday lunches all my life has been to do with who was at church and who not.

Being talked about

Such conversations are more than gossip. They are a form of pastoral care. Good parish priests take trouble to be aware of just who is present at church and who not. If folk are missing through illness, disaffection or battered faith, they need a phone call or even a visit. So if ever you have wondered whether you are ever talked or gossiped about, take heart. You are.

The new pharisees and puritans

Outraged indignation, self-righteousness, and finger-pointing were once considered to be a particular characteristic of Christians, especially those of the more extreme protestant or puritan sort. This soiled mantle has been passed on to various branches of the media these days. Christians, other than those on the fanatic fringe, appear to be far more concerned with forgiveness, mercy and the second-chance than judgement, I am proud to say.

The modern penitents' stool is the television studio's armchair. Those who most relentlessly search out, identify, harass and fulminate against "wrong-doers", are media interviewers, journalists and talk-show hosts. Ferret-faced inquisitors self-righteously smirk, probe, pinch and prod as they attempt to break victims down and make them squirm. It is a discomfiting and dispiriting spectacle.

It is not truth, ideology or even a punishment-freak theology that motivates this form of armchair torture. It is ratings and entertainment value. The more successful and total the skewering of a victim, the more likely is there to be a media award won.

Gaoled for contempt

At the start of an important trial, a small town lawyer called his first witness to the stand. She seemed a gentle, elderly lady. The lawyer approached her and asked "Mrs Jones, do you know me?" She responded, "Why, yes, I do know you Mr. Williams. I've known you since you were a young boy. You've become a huge disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their

backs. You think you're a brilliant lawyer, when you haven't the brains to realise you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes I know you." The lawyer, half stunned and wholly nonplussed pointed across the room and asked, "Do you know the defence lawyer?" She replied "Why, of course I do. I've known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. He also is a real disappointment. He is lazy, bigoted, never has a nice word to say about anybody and drinks like a fish. He's been divorced five times and everybody knows that his law firm is one of the shoddiest in the entire county. Yes, I know him." The judge rapped his gavel to quieten tittering spectators. Once the room was silent he called both lawyers to his bench. In a quiet, menacing voice he warned. "If either of you ask her if she knows me, you'll be gaoled for contempt!"

Here is an excellent poem by the black American Poet Countee Cullen:

Incident

*Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.*

*Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."*

*I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.*

(75) "This and That" - 8 February, 2015

An odd, troubled fellow, Stephen Fry. I like and admire him. He is shonky on God though.

I enjoyed the first volume of his autobiography: "*Moab is my Washpot*". The second volume I couldn't finish. It had too much to do with the celebrated and the successful. Dull stuff. I don't watch the BBC's Q.I for the same reason. Preening celebrities nauseate me.

Another book by Fry, "*The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within*", is the best, wittiest and most commonsensical book on the technique of versifying I have read. It also contains (with a warning a few pages before it appears) what is possibly the filthiest of all limericks. Not the wittiest or best of that jaunty genre though.

What kind of God would do that?

Fry has no sympathy for the Christian understanding of God. In a hugely popular YouTube clip he is asked what he would say if confronted by God after death. He replies, "*How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault?.....bone cancer in children? What's that about?..... the God who created this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac, utter maniac. Totally selfish. We have to spend our life on our knees thanking him. What kind of god would do that?.....The world is very*

splendid, but it also has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. They eat outwards from the eyes. Why? "Why did you do that to us? You could easily have made a creation in which that didn't exist. It is simply not acceptable." It's perfectly apparent that he is monstrous. Utterly monstrous and deserves no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish him, life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner, more worth living...."

As you would expect from a bright fellow like Stephen Fry, the case against belief in a good God is succinctly and clearly put, though glibly.

The opposite case

To put the opposite case is more complicated. I would say to Stephen Fry, rather than to God: "What about Love? What about Joy? What about Beauty? Why am I, I? Is my lovely little grandson's life, in the sum total of things, of no more significance than that of a bacterium? Can life be totally and unutterably meaningless and futile? Are self-giving love and human freedom even possible in a world that is not bound by immutable, inexorable natural laws that are much as we find them?"

The great questions of human existence are not best served by glib, absolutist answers. They demand teasing out, tangling and wrestling with, if they are to yield satisfying answers, albeit tentative, subtle, ambiguous and less than fully confident answers.

The Christian faith has been deeply nourishing to me. As much in its great cultural expressions as in its theological ones. Jesus of Nazareth, so impossible to pigeon hole, is fascinatingly radical, enigmatic, intriguing, paradoxical, elusive and compelling. The notion of a God who gets alongside us to share the horror of existence as well as its joy, and the ugliness of existence as well as its beauty, just because human existence is indeed worth it, is intriguing.

That love and beauty and truth are worth all the unutterable horror that appears to be their inescapable and necessary flip side, is aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually more satisfying than to opt out into a glib, hopeless nihilism, or into some sort of syncretistic cloudy "mysticism" drawn from here there and everywhere.

Ich habe genug

To each his taste though. No one is going to pop and (Stephen) fry in hell for what they believe or don't believe. Arguments rarely convince. Far better do what I shall do now. Sit back and reach out to touch the hem of Divinity by listening to the second aria of Bach's divine cantata BWV 82: *Ich Habe Genug*.

(74) "This and That" - 1 February, 2015

A little poem Diana and I read after matins recently fascinated me. By Derek Walcott, a West Indian poet and playwright awarded and Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, it interested me for two main reasons. The first is its implied invitation to love oneself. I have to confess that I find Andrew Neaum interesting, puzzling and absorbing. How horrible and un-Christian. Or is it? Because although I consider Andrew interesting, I do not consider him to be particularly clever, acute or important. To be intrigued by

oneself is not necessarily to have an excessive opinion of that self. Phew, what a relief. That I should respond with delight to the poem's notion of greeting one's self in the mirror with elation needs no apology.

The second reason for liking the poem is the comfort and hope it might bring to anyone living on their own, abandoned by someone they loved. Be it by divorce, some less drastic parting of the ways or even by death. How positive the poem's injunction to *give back your heart to itself, to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored for another...*

Love After Love

*The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

God bless him

I dashed up to St John's last Monday with someone who had burnt a CD for a forthcoming funeral to test the disk. There was a strange noise when we arrived. Two fellows were hoovering the sanctuary of the side chapel. The older of the two, noticing my dog collar, came across and said "I hope you don't mind, but my friend is autistic and likes to Hoover in a church." I assured him that I minded not at all. They finished before we did and went off with their Hoover. It was only later that I thought to myself, "how bizarre", and then even later, "was the Hoover theirs or ours?" A check proved it to be theirs not ours. How lovely that our church should be of use and a blessing to someone with so unusual a need.

Churches attract all sorts of strange, interesting and sometimes downright bizarre people. Having lived next door to one for pretty well all of my life, I rather miss not doing so now. It impoverishes my social life. One of my best friends in my last parish was a fellow I will call Tom. He talked to imaginary interlocutors incessantly when no one was around, but unlike more usual schizophrenics, as soon as you approached him he was able to return effortlessly to mundane reality and talk to you alone.

The church was his home. For about a year, literally so. I used to let him sleep in a spare room leading off from the church proper, much to the annoyance of some of my more po-faced parishioners. He was a somewhat difficult and cranky volunteer caretaker,

devout and hugely generous. He would kneel before the altar for long periods with his backside grotesquely in the air and leave a tenth of any money he earned from labouring jobs on the altar for us. The only parishioner we had who gave us a full tenth of his gross income. God bless him.

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