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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2016)



DEVOTIONAL CANDLES - UNDERGROUND ORTHODOX CHURCH COOBER-PEDY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

*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 **October 2016** 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>

(165) “This and That” - 30 October 2016 *Crossing Australia* (2)

I enjoy driving (down with driverless cars). Diana loves navigating (out with satellite navigators). Few joys match being behind the wheel of a nippy vehicle, beside a good navigator, with 5,600 kilometres of open road ahead.

Salt water crocodiles

We began our trans-continental trip south with a modest drive of 320 kilometres to Katherine. Once clear of Darwin’s straggling suburbs and sprawling industries, the countryside was unspectacular but pleasing; well wooded with medium sized to spindly trees and an undercover dominated by small, shiny leafed palms. More savannah than forest. Now and then there was evidence of recent fires, but elsewhere the foliage of the trees was verdant and lovely, especially whenever the terrain became hilly.

We stopped for a while at the township of Adelaide River. The river itself is notorious for saltwater crocodiles, the largest reptiles in the world. Like human beings, not only are they extremely dangerous, they have too a lifespan of threescore years and ten, plus.

Australia’s only war cemetery

The township is notable for Australia’s only war cemetery, where we stopped for a drink. It contains the remains of 14 airmen of the Royal Air Force, 12 unidentified men of the British Merchant Navy, one soldier of the Canadian Army and 18 sailors, 181 soldiers and 201 airmen belonging to the Australian forces. There are also 7 Australian Merchant seamen. Adjacent is a Civil Cemetery for 63 civilians, including nine Post Office workers killed in 1942 by a direct hit on the Darwin Post Office from Japanese bombs.

The cemetery is beautifully maintained and lush. In hot sunshine it was delightful to reacquaint ourselves with frangipani trees in rich, heavily scented, bright flower, an ancient flamboyant tree and many other old and colourful tropical friends we’d made years ago in Africa.

We later stopped for petrol at Pine Creek. This is an old gold and tin mining centre of about 665 people these days. It is the fourth largest town along the 1,500 kilometre stretch between Darwin and Alice Springs. I had to surrender my driver’s licence to a po-faced, bearded midget before being allowed to fill up the car. I assumed this to have something to do with the prevention of petrol sniffing. Not at all. It was to ensure that I did not drive off without paying. Pine Creek was one of the few top end towns that was not bombed by the Japanese during the war.

Katherine and its gorge

We stopped for a snack at Charles Darwin University. It was the deep shade of an avenue of large trees that invited us into this strangely quiet, unacademic seeming temple of learning with little sign of student life. It is a rural campus specialising in vocational courses, apprenticeships and traineeships in agriculture. One of five campuses and three training centres in a university of over 23,000 students.

We arrived in Katherine just in time to book a place on one of the flat-bottomed boats that take visitors up the Katherine River Gorge, and to dash the thirty or so kilometres to catch it. It is a costly excursion, but worth it. The gorge is an impressive deep water-cut fissure in richly coloured sandstone. In the dry season the river is tranquil and placid and can be boated on and swam in. Salt water crocodiles that invade in the wet season are removed in the dry, leaving only the harmless freshwater variety. There are thirteen gorges. Our tour lasted a couple of hours and used a couple of boats to cover two sections with a walk between. An irritatingly partisan commentary by the boat’s skilled pilot revealed him to be a far better boatman than historian.

Floods and booze

Katherine has an average annual rainfall of 39 inches. A good deal more than Boldre. Most is dumped during the five or six month ‘wet’. The town, of about six and half thousand people, is subject to serious periodic flooding.

Our motel was merely adequate, but a trip to a nearby store introduced us to an odd feature of Australia's Northern Territory. An armed, bored police woman sat on a stool by the liquor shelves. All alcohol outlets have just such a copper there to help stop the abuse of drink by aboriginals.

(164) "This and That" - 23 October 2016 *Crossing Australia* (1)

Our Australian holiday involved crossing the whole country from north to south by car. For the first time we were able fully to absorb and appreciate the continent's immensity, harsh beauty, and unutterable agelessness.

Waltzing Matilda and pro-pommie doggerel

An Australian as well as British citizen I love both countries, albeit critically. A patriot of each, not a nationalist.

When it comes to national anthems I am patriotically moved by the British, though regretting the loss of the strong bits learned as a child about scattering our enemies, confounding their politics & frustrating their knavish tricks.

Australia's anthem on the other hand arouses few patriotic sentiments. It is rousing *Waltzing Matilda* that does that. Its words about a thieving swagman are truer to the country's dubious colonial origins and gung-ho spirit than the bland optimism of *Advance Australia Fair*, the original version of which contains, unbelievably, the following pro-pommie doggerel:

*When gallant Cook from Albion sailed
To trace wide oceans o'er
True British courage bore him on,
Till he landed on our shore.
Then here he raised Old England's flag,
The standard of the brave;
"With all her faults we love her still"
Britannia rules the wave."*

Pullulating second-hand Europeans

The profoundest poetic treatment of Australis is found in A. D. Hope's sixties poem: *Australia*. It is unrelentingly negative for the first five of its seven stanzas....

*.....Without songs, architecture, history:
The emotions and superstitions of younger lands,
Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,
The river of her immense stupidity*

*Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.
In them at last the ultimate men arrive
Whose boast is not: "we live" but "we survive",
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.*

*And her five cities, like five teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.*

Escaping the chatter of cultured apes

The last two stanzas are more positive:

*Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,*

*Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.*

The adventure begins

We flew into Darwin on 13 September. Like A D Hope we returned gladly home, though leaving behind not cultured apes but the good, civilized folk of Boldre and Pilley.

Darwin was hot and humid. We were met at the airport by my son Peter. He had driven west and north from Victoria much the same route as we were to drive south and east. His small, feisty, four-wheel drive Suzuki *Vitara* has its back seats removed to accommodate his camping gear. This includes a much to be appreciated eskie/fridge. He took Diana and our luggage (one suitcase and two backpacks) to our motel. I sat waiting his return, soaking in the heat and listening with delight to strange bird calls.

The flight to Dubai and then the one to Perth were sparse of fellow travellers. Perhaps because it began on September 9/11. We were each able to sleep soundly across four seats, and so were well rested to begin a journey by road of ultimately 5,784 kilometres.

After an excellent meal with Peter, we drove around Darwin to get used to the car and stocked up on powdered soup and dried fruit. Australia produces two especially good dried soups, a Laksa and a Thai Red Curry. We have found nothing as good here in England.

(163) “This and That” - 16 October 2016

There is something fishy about Christianity. It is on the nose. It should be. It originates on the sea shore with the calling of four fishermen. Jesus is fishy too. He could predict where fish shoaled and find unlikely coins in their mouths. He shared a fishy picnic with 5000 fans and an alfresco, charcoal-grilled-fish beach breakfast with disciples.

Not Dandy Dilettantes

His fishermen disciples were professionals, not dandy dilettantes or happy hobbyists. Professionals as on the island of St Helena for whom the day began before dawn, fishing for mackerel as bait in the island's lee. Then out to the fishing grounds in a heavy swell with a heaving stomach. Waiting for tuna we dropped well-hooked lines into deep water to catch large, red, delectable fish called “bullseye”.

Then the drifting surface lines were taken. They sawed and sang, and the fishermen cursed and swore as they hauled in the tuna, gaffing the bleeding monsters onto the boat. These fishermen were wild, swash-buckling, hard-bitten, hard-drinking fellows. In the game for the money.

Christianity's roots reach back to such men; not to philosophers, scholars or lily-white-handed gentlemen.

The Gaol-Bird

One of the four man crew was a gaol-bird. An attractive rogue with a bandanna round his head. According to his boss he was a superb fisherman with a weakness for booze. Hence his stints in gaol. Perhaps not far removed from the Son's of Zebedee, the "Sons of Thunder". Such tuna fishermen might well provide more authentic models for Christian evangelists than today's

slick, smooth American-inspired professionals with their rallies and clichés.

At its best there is something swashbuckling and wild about authentic Christianity. God's will blows where it lists. We go along with it to be blown or blasted from our rut. There is risk and excitement in true faith. The struggle to reconcile what we want with what God wants can be titanic, creative and stimulating. Christianity need not and should not lead us into the dull ruts of puritanism, wowsersism, school-marmish censoriousness and conventionality. The company kept by Jesus reminds us of this.

Prayers Like Signal Flares

Christianity should be neither timid nor fearful. Philip Larkin in his brilliant but horrifying poem *Aubade* articulates the common lie of Christianity as timorous. He calls our faith a *vast moth-eaten musical brocade created to pretend we never die....*

Yet even a cursory study of death's place in the world's great faiths reveals that whatever gave rise to religion in human society, it is not fear of death. Judaism, for thousands of years offered no life beyond death worth living. So bring back the fishermen. Tie bandannas around heads. Boast a swash-buckling faith to re-convert the world.

*Peter jumped up in the pulpit
His hands all smelling of fish,
He guernsey was gay with the sparky spray
And white as an angel's wish.*

*The seagulls came in through the ceiling
The fish flew up through the floor,
Bartholomew laughed as he cast off aft
And Andrew cast off fore.*

*They charged the thundering churchyard
Like a lifeboat down the slip,
And the congregation in consternation
Prepared to abandon ship.....*

*"Draw your tots!" said Peter,
"Every man to his post!
It's not so far to heaven's bar
With the charts I've got of the coast!*

*Shoot the boom like Satan!
Prepare to take on boarders!
Send up your prayers like signal-flares!
I'll steam the secret orders!*

*"Stoke up the engine-room boilers
With slices of heavenly toast!
The devil's a weasel and travels on diesel
But I burn the Holy Ghost!".....*

(From the poem "Mevagissey" by Charles Causley - 'Collected Poems 1951-1997 pub. Macmillan')

(162) "This and That" - 9 October 2016

Celebrity chefs, cooking shows and bake offs are wearying. Too much ego, too little

gratitude. Yet food and gratitude belong together. Hence grace before meals.

A lovely custom, not as common as it used to be. Often perfunctory, said with chops well licked and a mouth full of anticipatory saliva, it can be dismissed as hypocrisy. But then there's more to hypocrisy than meets the eye.

Exposed

I recall as a boy watching my brother as our family said grace. He didn't close his eyes or bother to pretend to piety. He covertly clicked his fingers at the dog and scratched its ears. I said to our mother, *Peter didn't close his eyes to say grace*. To which my mother replied: *How do you know if you closed yours?* My brother gave me a triumphant and derisory grin. I was exposed as a hypocrite. I had pretended to a piety I hadn't practised. Aggrieved, I began mentally to exonerate myself, and not altogether unsuccessfully. My hypocrisy indicated that I considered saying grace important enough for me to pretend to be saying it. Why else would I have complained at my brother's blatant disregard of it? He didn't care enough even to put on an act. Which was worse? My hypocrisy or my brother's shameless and blatant honesty.

The values of hypocrisy

A hypocrite has values. Someone who doesn't care less about appearances, or give a damn about anything, who can't be bothered even to appear to do the right thing, might be most commendably no hypocrite, but could well be worse. Someone who values nothing. John Le Carré has made the point: *I am a hypocrite. I am a great believer in hypocrisy. It is the nearest we ever get to virtue. It is a statement of what we ought to be. Like religion, like art, like the law, like marriage, I serve the appearance of things.*

Jesus condemned the Pharisees, not so much for hypocrisy as for mistaking the appearance of things, for the reality. For mistaking going through the motions of being good for goodness itself. The state of the heart and mind had become irrelevant to them. All that was necessary was to keep the rules, keep up appearances, and all was well. Do that and you were good, could view yourself with complacent satisfaction.

At least some of our hypocrisy is a statement of what we feel we ought to be. Much human politeness is hypocrisy of this sort. We often say thank you, not in gratitude, but because good manners demand it. It oils human interaction. Commendable hypocrisy.

A gourmand bishop

My father knew a gourmand bishop who, when asked to say grace while dining out, would first carefully survey the table. If there was an abundance of wine glasses and a multiplicity of knives and forks he would begin: *O most bounteous and munificent Lord.....* If there was but one wine glass or none, and the cutlery was sparse he would begin: *For the least of these thy mercies O Lord.....*

On special occasions to help saying grace be other than perfunctory, trouble can be taken over composing one particular to the occasion. In one of my Australian parishes our: *Friendship Group* held an annual *Fish and Chip* night for the whole parish. I produced the following for one of them:

Grace for a Fish and Chip Night

*As well, Lord, as to fish and chips
To praise please open thou our lips.*

*Helps us love the things that matter
As well as fish fried crisp in batter.*

*Let our hearts with love be filled.
Not just our guts with fish well-grilled.*

For we're not vulgar sorts and crude,

We know there's more to life than food.

*If life's no more than well-greased lips,
Then when we die ... we've had our chips!*

(161) “This and That” - 2 October 2016

Next door neighbours can be challenging. For most of my life, mine has been God. The shadow of his house has fallen across nearly all of the gardens I've known. With such a neighbour little wonder parson's children develop quirks, peculiarities and eccentricities.

Candle-freak

Prolonged exposure next door to the lovely, flickering fragility of altar candlelight turned me into a candle freak. As boys my brother and I spent hours in an outhouse of our African mission station home. There we exploded bubbling-hot, molten wax looted from our next door neighbour's house with sudden applications of cold water. We also concocted waxen unguents and creams.

I love candles. I love what they symbolise. I love their warm and gentle light. I love their ancient origin in natural substances: beeswax and tallow, lovely words. I love the smell of snuffed candles wafting down from a distant sanctuary. The completion of worship. *Ite, missa est.*

I love the great Paschal candle with its primitive inscriptions and its annual, triumphal journey into the cavernous womb of a dark church. A church emptied of the Christ and of light and hope on Good Friday. Then, early on Easter morning, sending darkness and despair flitting fearfully to cobwebby corners and crannies of an ancient building. Darkness put to flight by the light of the risen Christ.

I love the memory of bank upon bank of small devotional candles before statues of saints in the dim religious gloom of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. I love the memory of tiny candles on the Christmas trees of my youth. Their heat heightening the coniferous, resinous scent of the tree.

I love the memory of acolytes' candle-flames. Diffusing incense smoke, their luminosity blurred to numinosity when raised in reverential awe and acknowledgment of consecration. I love candles. I am a candle freak.

Idolatry

Cold-hearted, anti-candle Protestants might well hold me up as a salutary example of the terrible dangers that candles hold for unwary worshippers. I am close to being a candle idolater.

In one of my churches there was a large candle in a great saucer of sand in the chapel. It was lit whenever a service took place there. A symbol and reminder of Christ's light beside us as well as within us as we pray.

Early every morning I lit it before Matins. As often as not I did more than that. I fed the thing. Behind the books and devotional bric-a-brac on my prayer desk I kept a hoard of candle stumps and wax overflows. As the big candle melted a deep well for itself, I fed it wax from my hoard, adding to its longevity. Sometime, to my chagrin, I overdid it and drowned the wick, putting out the light. A reminder that to focus too exclusively upon a symbol rather than on what it symbolises, extinguishes any enlightenment that the symbol might throw upon the greater reality it represents.

Candles are beautifully appropriate to sacramental worship. They are an example of how ordinary and functional objects can acquire sacramental significance and relevance. When gas and electricity rendered candles redundant we continued to use them. This is because, like bread and

wine, they had come to symbolise an otherness and beauty beyond the functional ordinariness of things.

Jesus chose bread and wine to do this. Candles, by long and close association with him, do something similar.

Sacramental masking tape

The servers of my first Australian parish told the story of a meticulous and perfectionist predecessor parson.

One Easter Eve, just before the solemn Easter Ceremonies, he dropped the beautifully decorated Paschal candle. It broke in two places. An excusable oath of unutterable anguish echoed through the dark and empty church and reached the ears of the gathering faithful outside. The great candle was rushed out to the Vicarage to be bandaged with masking tape, a good match in colour. The light of Christ that entered the dark church that year shone forth from a wounded candle as, at the first Easter, it had from a wounded Christ.

Even masking tape can take on sacramental significance in a world where every atom resonates its Creator.

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