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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (February 2017)



A LOCAL AT THE VICARAGE FRONT DOOR

*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 2017** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website:*

<http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>

(181) “This and That” - 26 February 2017

I would have cut a fine figure when men wore hose and galligaskins. I have a shapely pair of calves. Yet God ‘*hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse, neither delighteth he in any mans legs*’, says the psalmist. What a shame.

Civilizing a barbarous wilderness of a school

The credit for my shapely calves cannot be ascribed to my father. His were unremarkable. It might well go to a teacher called David Couper at Guinea Fowl Boys High in Rhodesia though. A pleasingly eccentric, South African born son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister. He wore handle-bar moustaches, had mighty legs and a passion for Scottish Country Dancing. This he passed on to me. To dance on the balls of your feet for hours as a teenager develops your calf muscles. Hence, I like to think, my shapely calves. Of no delight to God, to girls they were I hoped.

Against all odds David Couper persuaded half a school full of rugby-playing heavies to take up Scottish Country Dancing. He was despised for this by many of our rugby and cricket obsessed teachers, but it was the only civilising activity in a barbarous wilderness of a school.

Girls were part of the attraction. They were bussed in once a term for a formal dance. They were not the sole reason. Scottish dance music is hugely infectious. To those of a religious disposition like me (even then), dance, by imposing shape, pattern and order onto our world’s chaotic cacophony of aural and spatial stimuli resonates Divinity.

From Malawi to Knockando

After leaving Guinea Fowl, David Couper moved on to become headmaster of a school in Malawi. While there he had an interview with the infamous Dr Hastings Banda who told him that on no account must he ever allow any black students into the elite school. He then moved to Scotland to become headmaster of a school in the village Knockando, the home of a fine, single malt whisky. We visited him there in the year 2000, when for three months I swapped my Australian parish for one near Dundee.

He and his wife Jill on their honeymoon travelled north through Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in a Morris Minor. It had an ingenious boxed tent that opened out and was used on the roof. His wife Jill didn't fancy sleeping among ants and snakes on the ground, hence his invention of this strange contraption. It used to get so hot driving the Morris Minor in Africa that sometimes he would prod down the accelerator with a stick and drive with his bare feet out of the window. He and his wife, to share the driving, would sometimes swap seats at full speed.

He is the only teacher in my school career to whom I feel deeply indebted. Ironically he never taught me. His influence was outside the classroom, in dancing and friendship. My brother and I sometimes baby-sat his young children and he introduced us both to the haggis. Home made, and welcomed to the table in Gaelic it was dirk-disembowelled and I loved it. The only one I ever have.

Sheep or goat

Matthew Arnold's most memorable poem is *Dover Beach*. Less well known is *The Good Shepherd With The Kid*. It begins with a reference to Tertullian, a second century Church theologian. He fell into the Montanist heresy and maintained that a Christian who falls morally from grace cannot be redeemed. Is damned forever.

The poem then goes on to refer to a painting in the catacombs drawn by persecuted early Christians whose Church, unlike Tertullian, *...felt the tide (of love) stream from her Lord's yet recent grave*.

The catacomb painting is of the Good Shepherd returning from his search for a lost sheep. Over his shoulders is not a lamb, but a kid, a young goat.

The harsh distinction between sheep and goats is done away with. A different Gospel strand has been focussed upon. One truer to the heart of Jesus the consorter with publicans and sinners, the composer of the parable of the *Pharisee and Publican*, and the aphorism: "*Judge not....*"

Sheep, goat, saint, sinner, if we stray we're searched for by the Good Shepherd. Merit plays no part in being found and shouldered back to grace. Faith is all grace, all gift.

(180) "This and That" - 19 February 2017

Taking offense, blaming others and assuming victimhood are best avoided in privileged folk like ourselves. Real victims don't need pseudo ones piled on top of them.

Cultural deprivation on Tristan

I bless my parents for an adventurous and exciting childhood in outlandish places. I would not have swapped it for anything in the world. But I could just as easily (and stupidly) blame them for collateral cultural deprivation.

We had no gramophones on Tristan da Cunha or for most of our years in the African bush. Radio reception was exceedingly poor. My exposure to classical music on Tristan was *Lilliburlero* before crackly BBC news reports and pieces such as the *Harmonious Blacksmith* played by my mother on the piano and the church's asthmatic harmonium.

When my father formed an adult church choir that practised in our house, we children went to sleep to the sound of its fairly limited repertoire. As a family we also sometimes belted out old songs and ballads around the piano. In Pilley Vicarage you might still catch me croaking: *Wrap me up in my Tarpaulin Jacket* and *Who Loves not Women, Wine and Song, abides a Fool his Whole Life Long*.

Cultural deprivation in the African bush

In the African bush it was worse. The Anglican musical tradition was almost fully indigenised. There were drums, cantor-led chants with repetitive choruses and indulgently slow Victorian hymns in Shona. Any lively tunes culminated in eldritch ululations. The Eucharist was sung to a setting that approximated to *Merbecke*. Ever since no favourite.

My boarding school in Rhodesia was no purveyor of musical culture either. Guinea Fowl Boys High was obsessed by rugby and cricket. Musical education consisted of reluctant yobbos standing around a piano as an imported, elderly, local farmer's wife tried to teach and enthuse us with songs like *Sir Eglamore the Gallant Knight*. She failed.

On long bus rides to play rugby or cricket against other schools we sang coarse, armed forces parodies of familiar songs and hymns. That was my musical education.

Cultural awakening

Shortly before I left school my father swapped mission stations for a suburban parish. It made university affordable. I could live at home and join his choir. Until then I hadn't even fully realised that altos, tenors and basses each sang their own different melodies. A revelation and unutterable delight. I taught myself to read music and became a 16th, 17th and 18th century classical music obsessive.

With a little more money in our household my father and I began a record collection. Whenever we visited a strange town we would search out a good record shop and look for bargains. I left school at the end of 1964, the year that *Nonesuch Records* was founded to sell '*fine records at the same price as trade paperbacks*'. We made some wonderful purchases. One was a five disk set of all Bach's harpsichord concertos. It included his transcriptions of the concertos for violin. We played them endlessly.

A musical weekend

This reminiscing is prompted by last weekend. After the splendid concert in St John's with the *City of London Chamber Choir* and *Highcliffe Youth Choir* I found myself sitting next to the unassuming, erudite Stephen Field. He is the Chamber Choir's conductor and Anna Montagu Jones' brother. Over a delicious winter stew I quizzed him about the musical heroes of my youth. Alfred Deller, for example. To talk to someone who knew him and so many other of my musical idols of the 1960s and 70s was fascinating. It was Alfred Deller who introduced me to Orlando Gibbons on an early Archiv LP. His rendition of *This is the Record of John* with its splendid cadence at the end of the first verse entranced my father and me. It still does me.

The very next day we sat in Beaulieu Abbey listening to the *Romsey Singers* do full and beautiful justice to an Evensong dominated by Gibbons' music. Earlier in the week, on a visit to the West Country, I had made an effort to attend a weekday choral evensong in Wells Cathedral. It had been cancelled. To be beautifully compensated so close to home was satisfying indeed.

(179) "This and That" - 12 February 2017

Donald Trump's favourite biblical quotation is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That figures.

Lex talionis

Known as *lex talionis*, retaliatory justice is of very ancient pedigree. It is found in the Code of Hammurabi of 1754 BC and in Exodus and Leviticus. Nor is it as vengeful as it appears. It can and has been interpreted to be restrictive of revenge. In barbaric and violent times it attempted to limit compensation to no more than the value of a particular loss. Only one eye for one eye, one death for one death.

Jesus of Nazareth in his radical Sermon on the Mount repudiated retaliatory responses to evil thus: Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other.

This is a far crazier ethic than that of the Donald. I love it for just that, but even more because it opens the door to that great, always surprising and unpredictable game-changer in matters of conflict, forgiveness.

The poet James Stephens takes forgiveness to be inclusive even of the fallen angel Satan:

The Fullness of Time

On a rusty iron throne,	And to him from out the sun
Past the furthest star of space,	Came his father and his friend
I saw Satan sit alone,	Saying, - Now the work is done
Old and haggard was his face;	Enmity is at an end -
For his work was done, and he	And He guided Satan to
Rested in eternity.	Paradises that He knew

Gabriel, without a frown;
Uriel, without a spear;
Raphael, came singing down,
Welcoming their ancient peer;
And they seated him beside
One who had been crucified.

Favourite quotations

What is your favourite biblical quotation? I find it hard to say. A good number of my favourites are linked to musical settings. Thomas Tomkins' setting: *When David heard that Absalom was slain he went up into his chamber over the gate and wept and thus he said: My son Absalom, O Absalom my son, would God that I had died for thee*, is heartrendingly beautiful. I love it to bits. It is the lament of a loving father for a son who has dealt treacherously with him. A foreshadowing of the parable of the Prodigal Son. I have a sermon on it. *My son Absalom, O Absalom my son, would God that I had died for thee*.

Seventeenth Century post mortem

Incidentally Thomas Tomkins was a friend of Orlando Gibbons, whose setting of Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis can be heard at Evensong in Beaulieu Abbey at 4.30pm today. Gibbons is one of my favourite composers. He died so suddenly of 'apoplexy' that:

rumours were cast out that he did die of the plague, whereupon we caused his body to be searched by certain women that were sworn to deliver the truth, who did affirm that they never saw a fairer corpse. Yet notwithstanding we to give full satisfaction to all did cause the skull to be opened in our presence & we carefully viewed the body, which we found also to be very clean without any show or spot of any contagious matter. In the brain we found the whole & sole cause of his sickness namely a great admirable blackness & syderation in the outside of the brain. Within the brain (being opened) there did issue out abundance of water intermixed with blood & this we affirm to be the only cause of his sudden death.

Wilted flowers on the chancel step

The last time Diana and I heard Orlando Gibbons' Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis was in 'St Matthew in the City', Auckland, New Zealand, an excitingly radical Anglican church. To hear a flawlessly sung traditional Evensong there was pleasingly ironic. We sat in the front row of a well attended church. As the service began a little down and out fellow crept up to the front in a pink T-shirt inscribed: *Jesus is the reason for the season*. He held a large pink balloon hand on a stick and some wilted flowers which he placed gently on the chancel step. He then sat reverently allowing Anglican high culture to transport him heavenwards. Beauty and truth transcend class, privilege, education and culture.

(178) "This and That" - 5 February 2017

Five Sundays in one month are a bonus. This in February can occur only in leap years, and if the first day of the month is a Sunday. It happens once in 28 years. The last time was in 2004, the next will be 2032, then 2060.

Redeeming bad words

Intrusive evangelical Christians sometimes have the temerity to ask, *Are you saved?* The best answer was given by "The Gloomy Dean", William Inge: *I'm damned if I'm not!* It is not a question I would ever think to ask anyone. I assume God's love and mercy to be all inclusive.

Far more interesting is the question: *Can bad words be saved?* They can. I considered the Australian word *larrikin* in my Australia Sunday homily. Originally the word was an insult meaning *lout*, *hoodlum* or *hooligan*. Not so now. It has been inverted to mean almost the opposite. A *larrikin* is someone who refuses to kow tow to authority, or to stand on ceremony. He is an attractive scallywag.

So larrikinism has been redeemed. It is now proudly adopted as a positive attribute of the Australian character. The Australian Naval Attaché, Shane Craig, who was with us last Sunday

representing the Australian Ambassador, admitted quite happily, in his few words to us, to having been a *larrikin* when young. I pointed out in my homily that the word *bastard* in Australia has also been saved. It is now a term of affection there. The word *bloody* is heading the same way. It is already as anodyne as *daft* or *silly*.

Semantic engineering

There are words that remain offensive though. Not least the f-word, the c-word. If the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury got together to redeem such words by granting them lovely, positive or spiritual meanings, would they begin to lose their offensiveness?

When my children were small we attempted a bit of semantic engineering of this sort. We declared the word *Paganini* to be our family insult of insults. The fact that *Paganini* the violinist was said to be in league with the devil added authenticity to the choice. When pressed for the word's meaning we declared it to be *page nine* in Italian.

It worked very successfully. My oldest son Peter at his St Helena Primary School was disciplined for using the word with venom sufficient to convince even his teacher of the toxicity of its meaning.

An unsuccessful euphemism

On that same Island I organised a group of church boys to play football. They played with zest, natural ability and mild profanity. Every time they missed a goal, or made a mistake they would shout *s - - t*. After a few weeks of this I gathered them together and said that I would prefer them to use the word *sherbet*. This caused much hilarity. The unacceptable word was loudly, frequently, pointedly and ostentatiously elided into *sherbet* with crude gusto. The final collapse of my plan was engineered by a clever little lad coming up to me and shouting: *O father, father, I'm desperate. Can I go and have a sherbet*. On reflection, if I failed in an attempt at semantic engineering, the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury wouldn't stand a chance.

Interpreting and understanding

On our daily, early morning walks we not only note, but also automatically attempt to find a reason for anything that is different or changed since our last walk by. Broken branches and twigs on the road suggest to us either a windy night or the passage of a lorry too high for minor country lanes. Tractor-tyre churned mud indicates the beginning of the removal of silage rolls stored in a local field. The absence of a pool of standing water after heavy rain indicates a ditch that has at last been dredged, and so on. We do this automatically, naturally, unconsciously. Raw human experience is noted, interpreted and made sense of, before being allowed it to drop into our subconscious.

The whole religious enterprise is similar. It is an attempt to make sense of and interpret all that happens. It's a natural, automatic response to experience. Not to interpret, understand, or even want to, is unnatural, mystifying.

Hypochondria

The epitaph of a hypochondriac: "See!"

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