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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (September 2018)



FROM CORFE CASTLE - DORSET

*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 **September 2018** 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>

(259) “This and That” - 2 September 2018

As a child in Africa, when home from boarding school, I went to church at least twice on Sundays. On weekdays to matins and evensong every day. Though often bored witless, I look back on it with affection and nostalgia.

Cow Dung Floors

Cow dung, judiciously diluted with mud and then smoothed and dried, polishes up to a gold-flecked, gleaming, green-brown floor that is less cruelly resistant to un-kneeler knees than harsh concrete. The dried mud of termite runnels in the rafters dropped occasional chunks on to our heads. Geckoes darted up and down the walls. The shuffle and whisper of bare feet, wailing babies, acrid smells and an incomprehensible liturgy left a great deal for the imagination to work wonders with. The singing, rich in harmony, stirred and thrilled though. Accompanied by drums and homemade gourd maracas the women, when excited, would begin shrilly to descant and then ululate, shuffling into the aisle for little impromptu dances.

There was little pretended piety. The congregation scratched their heads, fiddled with their ears, eyes and noses, rarely closed their eyes, walked in late, very late and too late, suckled their bright-eyed, shiny-faced and lovely babies. There was no tut tutting or censoriousness. It was all shamelessly off hand and casual. The services rambled on interminably. The arrival of the white priest and his family at isolated mission out-stations was a fascinating and rare event. We were always well gawped at throughout a service.

Well Naturalised

I experienced European worship too. In small English-type churches, homes or clubs, my father took services in white farming areas as well. An interesting contrast. The authenticity and naturalness of African worship seemed largely absent from European. The delicate transplant from Europe that is Christian worship, survived in the loving care of Europeans, but feebly. In the care of rural Africans it put down deep roots, coarsened, naturalised, and became strong, vibrant and took on a life of its own.

Possibly because rural Africans still lived in a largely undemythologised world. God, spirits, angels, demons and ghosts had not yet been elbowed to life's periphery. Spiritual beings were experienced realities. Worship was an activity that came naturally.

We live in a different world. Where is our God? Where do we encounter him? We can only point to a few strange experiences, if any at all, and they are ambiguous and dubious. A few blessed primitives among us assure us of demons, angels and ghosts in their actual experience, but although sincere, primitives they are. Retrogressives, clinging to a world that knowledge and learning have destroyed.

Our world has been demythologised. This is why worship to many seems unreal. We worship what we don't know and rarely experience. So we pretend, strike pious poses, look and act devout when only puzzled, mystified, bored. To be as casual and natural at worship as the rural Africans of my youth might give the game away. This contrast drove me to sacramentalism: to God perceived, known and revealed in the bread and wine of ordinariness.

A shift of perspective

For worship to be as authentic as African worship, more than mere assent to propositions or to a moral force and code, more than just nostalgia or an expression of community and belonging, there has to be a real God to experience, even in a demythologised world.

Elizabeth Barret Browning shows the way:

*Earth's crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees takes off his shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins likewise:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;*

It's a matter of seeing, a way of opening the eyes. It's a shift of perspective and a change of focus that allows God into our life and world.

(260) “This and That” - 9 September 2018

For the next few weeks this column is to be made up of extracts from an introduction I wrote to a collection of my father's reminiscences published in Australia. He was a remarkable fellow and one of the reasons I am a priest. First an abbreviated extract from his will....

An extract from Canon David Neaum's will

“If in Australia I would prefer my body to lie with Dorothy (ie in Queensland) with the cost paid out of anything I leave. If abroad I wish to be buried, not cremated. I demand the cheapest coffin possible and a curse on anyone who puts any ‘Stone’ on my grave. A curse also on any Mortician who ‘Tarts me up’. I would wish for no mourning, no dark clothes, no ‘Bun-fight’ - merely a family drink to wish me well.

Wherever I die (unless a plane accident drops me in the sea) I would like the 1662 Prayer Book Service with Psalm 90 and, if possible 2 hymns, No: 682 in the old A & M book - ‘Awake our soul..’ and No: 298 in A & M Revised, ‘Lead Kindly Light..’ sung to the 2nd tune by J.B. Dykes (The only way I can get this tune is to die!!), but I shall not haunt my sons if the tune ‘Sandon’ has to be sung.

I would prefer the Officiating Priest and family only at the cemetery...thanks to all my family for their love and care to their Mum and me. Commandment No. 5 well and truly kept!”

Canon David Neaum by Canon Andrew Neaum (1)

Canon David Neaum died on Holy Innocents' Day, 2001 at the age of 89.

Unusual for a priest, although a great talker, he was more a man of action than of words. He was happier in the kitchen, the field, the work shed and out and about in the parish than he was in the office. His were not the lily white hands of the scribe. Nor was he much given to introspection, at least publicly, or to wearing his heart and feelings on his sleeve. Like the Synoptic Gospels' Jesus of Nazareth, he is to be found and known and loved in narrative and lively conversation. The sort of person he was had to be deduced, discovered and inferred from the doings and events of an active and travelled man. It is the story that matters, that holds the key to the person and personality. His love of his children and of all close friends, as well as his faith in God, were articulated far more in deed than word.

The raconteur

It is fitting therefore that he should have been above all else a raconteur, a teller of stories. For much of his life he was a sort-after dinner table guest, because he could so easily and so well

fascinate his fellow guests with deceptively simple, often comic but straightforward stories of his Derbyshire youth and of his small Atlantic island and African mission-priest travels and experiences. To invite him to dinner was to have him dominate the evening with such stories. Dorothy his wife would nod in agreement, add a provocative comment or two now and then, and if the wine had been liberally poured, nod off and snore happily as the familiar tales followed on, one after the other, enthralling the company.

Golden Bells and Pomegranates

On his retirement from parish ministry and after the death of his beloved Dorothy, the calls upon his time became less demanding and he began to put his gifts as a raconteur to good use. He wrote down some of his stories and published them in parish pewsheets and magazines. His first series, “Golden Bells and Pomegranates”, was written and published in the news-sheets of the Queensland Parish where he settled on leaving the Island of St Helena. It is a series of stories about his long and interesting life as a deacon and priest, beginning in England, moving on to Tristan da Cunha, back to England, then to Rhodesia and on finally to the island of St Helena. The deceptively simple and unadorned style of the stories and their positive and profoundly appreciative view of ordinary Anglican parish life and priesthood proved extremely popular in his parish. Eventually I began to publish them in the parish magazines of Ararat Parish and then in the Ballarat Diocesan paper which I edited at the time. Rather to my surprise they were very popular with church folk who did not even know him, especially lay people. The clergy were another matter as we shall see next week.....

(261) “This and That” - 16 September 2018

Canon David Neaum 1912-2001

.....My father’s articles that I printed in the Ballarat Diocesan Chronicle were popular with the laity. They enjoyed appreciative accounts of parochial life in England, on Tristan da Cunha, in Rhodesia and on St Helena. The clergy were less enamoured.

This was demonstrated by the arrival in Ballarat of a new bishop. He was disparaging of my father’s offerings in the diocesan paper. He quickly turned the paper into a dull public relations rag dominated by pictures of himself, his own ruminations and stale parish-pump waffle. My father viewed all this with an amused and tolerant charity that I found more difficult to muster.

Artlessness

Why was Canon David Neaum so good and popular a raconteur? On the face of it, it had little to do with style. His stories, both at the dinner table and in his two written series, are artless and simple. It is the story that matters, what is told that appeals, not how it is told.

Yet it’s not quite as simple as that. Artlessness is an art in itself. It was his lack of artistry that allowed the narrative and its characters so memorably and simply to live and to be. Events and people come to life in his stories just because they are not obscured by verbiage and analysis. People encountered in a long and interesting life, and the events and occurrences of that life are simply presented as they were, and prove fascinating in themselves.

Because Canon David held very definite and strong opinions, there is no suspicion whatsoever of blandness to his tales. On the contrary, there is the spice of politically incorrect comment, but it is a light spicing, the opinions are declared largely in asides and sparingly. It is the story and the people, the events and the happenings that hold the interest. He had a perspective on life that made the ordinary appear fascinating.

He sought out exotic places in which to exercise his ministry and he loved and enjoyed life, the Anglican priesthood and the common man and woman. He also had the good fortune to spring from a more than usually talented, eccentric and interesting family.

Conservative, but not madly

Another attraction was his faith. In an age of doubt and angst, his soundness and surety of faith were appealing and reassuring. He lived out the faith in a strong, practical and altogether admirable way. He was brought up in a very musical, high church parish. Many of his stories dwell appreciatively upon that grounding, but he eventually reacted against extreme Anglo-catholicism. He moved to more solid, central ground while retaining a largely catholic inclusiveness, style and sense of order and dignity in worship.

He loathed liturgists and loved the old Prayer Book rites. He maintained, I am sure rightly, that many of the liturgists who desired to reform the Prayer Book were bored by the daily offices and liturgy. He, on the other hand, prayed them with relish. Their lack of respect for and love of the old rites made them the very last people to be entrusted with so precious a treasure as the divine liturgy.

Although a conservative, he was not madly so. He came to tolerate and then almost even to appreciate the new rites, though always preferring the old. Likewise with the ordination of women. He could see no sense, once this (to him) regrettable innovation had become a fact, to go on resisting it to the detriment of the far more important work of the Church.

Devotional life

His devotional life was centred upon the daily office. Unless desperately ill or in the most extreme of circumstances, he never ever failed to say matins and evensong, usually with Dorothy his wife, and when his children came home from boarding school, or just happened to be around, with them too.....

(262) “This and That” - 23 September 2018

Canon David Neaum 1912-2001

.....In his old age and with failing eye sight he would take an hour or two over each daily office, struggling to read the lessons, falling asleep between verses, but insistent upon saying everything. A reticent man he didn't reveal what his private prayer consisted of, but up until the end he was a great intercessor, asking for particular names from the parish sick list in need of prayer. I personally have been prayed for daily and lovingly for every day of my life. I like to think that this continues from beyond death.

Popular sermons

His sermons, as often as not, were narrative in style. He would tell the biblical story in his own words, digressing into his own story periodically and then drew usually orthodox and profoundly commonsensical and practical conclusions. He never preached from a written text, just a few notes. Not at all my own style, but as he once said to me when I complained about someone else's sermon, “There is not a sermon preached that can't, if listened to in the right spirit, confer some blessing upon a listener.” Certainly most people loved his sermons and found in their accessibility, common sense wisdom and certainty of faith, a useful aid in making sense of the Bible and applying faith to daily living.

An exacting and fierce choirmaster

One of his greatest enthusiasms was music. He had a light tenor voice that remained sure

and true to the end of his life, and was not averse to singing alto for pleasure. He was able to sing the versicles at Choral Evensong in St John's Wodonga up until a few months before he died.

He was recruited into his parish church choir at the age of six, where, under a particularly talented and tyrannical rector/choirmaster he learned all that was necessary to make him, once ordained, a successful choirmaster himself.

Wherever he went as a parish priest he either founded a choir or took over the running of an existing one. The only long gap in his choral activity was as a mission priest in Africa. There, surprisingly, he did not get involved in African choral singing, probably because the school on the mission station was for boys, and the only women available were unable to read, let alone read music.

He was an exacting and fierce choir master. If he thought the choir was dragging, even during a service, he would start loudly snapping his fingers to get everyone back in time. He loved it all, and his choristers loved him.

Father and son collaboration

For many years the only music listened to in our house was homemade, my mother being a pianist. It was not until we left mission work and the bush that we acquired a gramophone and the wherewithal to buy luxuries like records. On my leaving boarding school to go to university, during which time I lived at home and began to develop a passion for music myself, the two of us began a musical collaboration. I sang in his choir and edited his parish magazine, in which the hymn numbers for the month were printed and so I began to pick them. In those days I had a bias against any tunes written later than about 1820. So Orlando Gibbons and his like ruled. Even the great Victorian sentimentalists like J B Dykes were only sparingly sung. How the congregation put up with it I don't know, but they were led by a good choir and my father's tastes largely coincided with my own.

He also financed me in building up of a record collection. Wherever we went on holiday outside of sanctions-pinched Rhodesia, we searched out record shops and spent happy hours listening to and buying early music, nothing later than Beethoven. It was only on leaving Australia that I parted with this collection. The records had been played for years on inferior equipment. Only sentimentality tied me to them. Their clicks and scratchiness was unbearable for sustained and serious listening.....

(263) "This and That" - 30 September 2018

Canon David Neaum 1912-2001

.....What was it in 1952 that motivated my father to leave rural ministry in England, to which he seemed so well suited, and head off to the uttermost parts of the world?

A builder and plumber priest

He certainly felt himself called to mission work. Had it not been Tristan da Cunha it would have been somewhere else. The seeds had been planted by holidaying missionaries who came to his church to preach when he was a child. His practical, people-oriented and out-of-the-study style of priesthood suited old fashioned mission work. Particularly in Rhodesia where he managed thirty two or more schools that necessitated travelling enormous distances each month over appalling roads in badly sprung vehicles.

It was this, he maintained, that wrecked his neck, giving him a trembling head with a persistent pull to one side that caused him great discomfort until his death.

He built teachers' houses, classrooms and churches, usually doing the plumbing himself. He designed and built his own and an assistant's house on a new mission station, helped by an amiable African builder. His blunt speaking, honesty and sense of humour were appreciated by the Africans. When the liberation war began to manifest itself in the burning of schools and churches, he let it be known that should any buildings in his care be burned there would be no chance of them being rebuilt. None was burnt.

Moving to town

He left mission work in order to see me and my brother, should he so choose, through university. There was no way that this could be financed on an un-augmented mission priest's pittance. In those days the Easter Offering was given to the priest to augment his salary. On mission stations this was but a few pounds. In white suburban parishes it could be several thousand.

He took on the parish of St Mary's in an affluent suburb of Salisbury (Harare). He stayed there seventeen years until retirement. It was a happy time. He was much appreciated by the parishioners and although more a country than suburban priest, there remained happily a country component to his parish. For a long time he was also the effective archdeacon of a huge swathe of country. In his own parish he extended the rectory and planned and oversaw the building of a detached bed-sitter for my use, combined with servants quarters and a garage.

St Helena and Australia

His final fling as a full-time priest, though officially retired, was on the island of St Helena. He became the parish priest of Jamestown and archdeacon of the island. It was probably a mistake. He and Dorothy were less than content, possibly because they were trying to recapture the Tristan da Cunha experience, and the world and its people, even on small islands, had changed enormously in thirty or more years. After three years, with some relief, they left to retire in Queensland, where my brother had settled.

Husband and father

As a husband and father he is more difficult to sum up. He was a reticent man when it came to matters of the heart. If there was any discord between his wife Dorothy and himself they kept it entirely to themselves. His children saw none of it. They were an admirably suited pair. Though David was a man who liked and usually got his own way.

My mother was a strong-minded and willed person herself though, and could manage him to a great extent, if and when she felt it necessary, but she allowed him an enormous say, even in how she dressed. He would go shopping for frocks and handbags with her and make the final choice. Often buying three, four or more at a time. She appeared to trust his taste totally. *(to be continued in October)*

Home