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## **BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (January 2021)**



### ***Church Lane, 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. The following are the **January 2021** 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>

## (385) "This and That" - 31 January 2021

Fairy tales traditionally end with the phrase: ...*they lived happily ever after*. The Middle Eastern masterpiece, "A Thousand and One Nights" offers a more realistic formula: ....*they lived happily until there came to them the One who destroys all happiness* (i.e. death). Russian versions of fairy tales likewise acknowledge reality, but gently: ...*they lived long and happily, and died together on the same day*.

### Eucatastrophe

The desire for a happy ending is all but universal. Not least in myself. Thanks to present circumstances Diana and I are watching more films and television series than heretofore. Our choices are made on the strength of the single sentence blurb inviting us to click our way in. We've watched some pretty torrid stuff over the last few months.

The BBC in particular offers more than a fair share of miserable endings. I say to Diana afterwards: "why have we subjected ourselves to the likes of that?" The *Wallander*, series ends with a realistic depiction of the hero's descent into dementia. I've seen enough of this in reality ever to want to relive it in my sitting room at the end of a peaceful day. It's made me wary of Scandinavian dramas. As T S Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*, possibly with me in mind:

*Go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.*

In the seventeenth century a fellow called Nahum Tate decided to improve Shakespeare's *King Lear* by producing his own version. In it Lear survives and Cordelia marries Edgar. Tate's version became the norm for a century and a half. The original was almost forgotten. In 1823 Edmund Kean played King Lear with its authentic, tragic end, but it failed and he reverted to Tate's crowd-pleaser after a mere three performances. Only in 1838 was Shakespeare's original tragic end successfully restored.

I wonder if my desire for a happy ending isn't related to the Christian Faith. In a 1942 essay J.R.R. Tolkien ends up discussing the "consolations of the happy ending," which he calls the *eucatastrophe*, "... the sudden joyous turn." When all hope seems lost and circumstances can't get any bleaker, suddenly, and against all odds, hope emerges. This "... denies universal final defeat...is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." The Latin word evangelium, means "good news", or in Old English "godspel." Tolkien would have been fully aware of its Christian undertone.

### Rest in Peace Susan Bedingham

On 22 January my sister Susan died in Cape Town of Covid. She was an utter brick. A lovely person. There were three of us, Peter in Australia, Sue in Cape Town, myself in Boldre. The triangle has collapsed into a straight line. As I sat in my study miserably absorbing the news, the bright screen of my computer suddenly flicked off, went black. It signified her departure. Gone. No more. Snuffed out. Kingfishers catch fire

A little later Diana brought in two candles. She lit them. They too went out. As she reached for a match to relight them, entirely of their own accord they popped into flame. Christian hope. There'll be a natural explanation of course. But it's not to the point. May my lovely sister Sue rest in peace.

My daughter send me this poem a few weeks ago:

### PRAYER IS LIKE WATCHING FOR THE KINGFISHER

Prayer is like watching for  
The kingfisher. All you can do is  
Be there where he is like to appear, and  
Wait.  
Often nothing much happens;  
There is space, silence and

Expectancy.  
No visible signs, only the  
Knowledge that he's been there  
And may come again.  
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,  
You have been prepared.  
But when you've almost stopped  
Expecting it, a flash of brightness  
Gives encouragement.

*Ann Lewin*

### **(384) "This and That" - 24 January 2021**

An imagined or imaginary girlfriend can be twice, thrice or a thousand times more beautiful, sexy, intelligent and witty than an actual one.

Compared to the real thing, though, she's as nothing. Palpitating, pulsing, palpable reality, that's what it's all about. That's what it's all about.

#### **What it's all about**

We clergy can be too easily beguiled into thinking otherwise. Fooled by the greater numbers that watch 'virtual' church services than attend actual church services, we're tempted to suppose that the future lies in armchair worship from home. Virtual worship not actual worship. God forbid. Never. Palpitating, pulsing, palpable reality, that's what it's all about. That's what it's all about.

Over the past three months the average number of people viewing our recorded Sunday services at home is 145. A fair proportion of these will have been couples, so this is a conservative total.

If we take out the two highest totals (Remembrance Sunday 369 and Nine Lessons and Carols 196), as well as the lowest (the Sunday immediately after Christmas Day 90), then the average number of viewings for recorded Sunday services is 136.

Given that this is a conservative total, it's a good congregation for a country church. We rejoice in it.

#### **Sinners, saints, scallywags, mystics**

But the validity and authenticity of each Sunday's 'virtual' service lies in the vibrancy and reality of an actual, flesh and blood community, worshipping together in church. Palpitating, pulsing, palpable reality, that's what it's all about. Real community. That intriguing, lovable, rag tag and bobtail mix of the fervent and the Laodicean, of saints and sinners, of mystics and scallywags, of the unutterably lovely and downright dubious.

#### **The way of the future**

It has been suggested that "virtual" worship is the way of the future. That small churches should be closed, and actual communal worship retreat solely and permanently behind a screen. Corpuscles to pixels. Bumbling parsons to posturing celebrities. Callous-bummed pew sitters to couch potatoes.

It would mean swapping our loving and forgiving, squabbling and quarrelling, face to face fellowship with keep-at-arms-length, never-touch-with-a-barge-pole separation. A denial of everything we stand for.

Our expertly recorded, virtual services, so valuable to the isolated and isolating, the far distant and housebound are heart-warming and lovely, just because they are grounded in, and authenticated by an actual, living, vibrant, worshipping community. Palpitating, pulsing, palpable reality, that's what it's all about. That's what it's all about.

#### **Stabilised in solidarity**

In these severely restricted and often lonely times, the modestly attended services that are still being held in church for the few of us fool-hardy enough to risk being there, are poignantly special.

Carefully distanced, well ventilated, masked and safety conscious, simply being with others is a blessing of blessings. Is peace, perfect peace.

To be with a few fellow Christians, focussed upon God, in an ancient building that's been a refuge, solace and support through war, plague and natural disasters of every sort for centuries is heartening. It helps stabilise us into solidarity with those present in the flesh, those so generously peopling the graveyard's dust and those watching at home, in careful and very necessary isolation.

There is not a Sunday this year that St John's and St Nicholas' have not been warmed by actual worship. During the first lockdown it was just Diana and myself. As soon as restrictions eased, in July, there has been an average of seventy in St John's and twelve in St Nicholas's every Sunday.

During the present, renewed restrictions there remain about thirty five at St John's and nine at St Nicholas'. So our lovely, recorded services remain authenticated and grounded in palpitating, pulsing, palpable reality, which is what it's all about, what it's all about.

### **(383) "This and That" - 17 January 2021**

Weather reports are deplorable. They take surprise from our day to day existence.

#### **Viva surprise**

On opening my computer each morning the first website I turn to is that of the Met Office. It ensures that rarely am I surprised by a snowfall, drenched in a thunder storm, or astonished by a cloudless, sunny day. It's a pity. Without surprise lives are diminished.

So a pox on all that's predictable be it weather, sermons, spouse, friends, conversations, poems, novels or music. Viva surprise. Viva surprise.

#### **Trigger thumb**

There's a sixteenth century proverb that characterises the clumsy as being *all thumbs*. It makes sense. For although the thumb is the most agile and versatile of digits, it requires collaboration with its nimbler, fellow fingers to achieve great things.

Though not in texting, now one of the major means of human communication. Texting allows the thumb to go solo, or more usually duo, for the left hand thumb works in concert with the right. Mere fingers are relegated to the menial and passive role of simply holding the phone steady.

Typing is far more democratic. Every digit has a vital part to play, though the thumb's role is humble. It merely thumps the space key.

The thumb's pride of place in texting can come at a physical price though. Over-taxed texting thumbs succumb to a malady variously called 'texting thumb', 'gamer's thumb', 'Nintendo thumb' or 'trigger thumb'.

In such ailments the sheath through which the tendon slides to manipulate the digit, painfully inflames or frays. If a slight obstruction develops it causes a painful, trigger-like but silent click every time the digit is opened. Hence, 'trigger thumb'.

As a speedy typist I know all about this. I have suffered the complaint in three of my fingers, not my thumbs. The first time, in Australia, I had the finger operated on to fix. The second time, here in England, I simply suffered until it cured itself. The third time is now, in 2021. My left hand's forefinger suffers as I type. I bank on it curing itself.

#### **The sunrise of wonder**

I am no fan of texting, and particularly dislike its ubiquitous and ugly abbreviations. Nor am I enamoured of the predictive texting facility offered on most phones. When I am required to text I do so laboriously, with a single finger not a thumb and I take a petty delight in mystifying the predictive text algorithm by using words it never comes anywhere near to predicting. This minor pleasure cannot last. The phone will store every obscure or unusual word I use until it's banked them all and is able to dazzle me with a verbal precocity learned from myself, and so unworthy of my admiration and bedazzlement.

G K Chesterton should have the last word upon the joy of surprise in daily life:

*At the back of our brains, so to speak, there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life is to dig for this sunrise of wonder.*

### **Through the vale of misery**

I love visiting and attending cathedrals, abbeys, and churches. That's why Psalms 84 is a favourite, it begins:

*O how amiable are thy dwellings, thou Lord of hosts! My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord : my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.....*

Embedded in the Psalm's middle is something more profound. It speaks to these troubled times:

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are thy ways. Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well : and the pools are filled with water. They will go from strength to strength :*

A non believing columnist I admire, remarking on the wisdom of this, writes:

*"if you can't believe in the God of the Bible, it is sometimes best to act as if you did, for the faith that one's suffering has some value or meaning beyond itself is the best way to transcend it, even if there are no indubitable metaphysical grounds for holding such a faith.."*

## **(382) "This and That" - 10 January 2021**

All of a dither. All of a dither. Do I refer to myself or Boris Johnson? Either way, dither's a good word derived from a better one: *didderen*.

### **Dithering with Boris**

I'm all of a didder, all of a didder, *didderen* being a Middle English word that means to quake or tremble. Over decades and a century or two it morphed into dodder and then into dither. These days to dither means to be indecisive and to vacillate in opinion.

All of a dither, all of a didder, all of a dodder. Do I refer to myself or Boris Johnson? Either way it's a sign of grace. Decisive people are dangerous. The soundest decisions are made only after much diddering, doddering and dithering. Then, even if too late, at least they're considered.

This column is apolitical, but what our Prime Minister is most reviled for, I most empathise with and like. He dithers? Good. He's prone to U-turns? Excellent. So am I, so am I.

### **Craven capitulation**

I have been dithering over how best to honour the laudable and sensible restrictions placed upon us to render us safe. While at the same time remaining true to the Gospel's inclusive openness to all and sundry.

It was dispiriting during the first national lockdown to see all those surrender-white notices pinned to locked church doors forbidding entry, even for private prayer. A denial of all we stand for. It seemed a craven capitulation to funk. Never again. Never again.

But we do need to be mindful of safety. So I dither, didder and dodder yet again. Should we retreat into 'virtual' worship only? Some church leaders are recommending that we do. But no! Heaven forbid. Never. Never ever.. (Oops, I've stopped dithering, diddering and doddering).

At St John's and St Nicholas' church services will continue at the usual times. We will be few in number, doubtless, but that some of us, in these isolated and isolating times, are still able simply to be together with others in our beautiful buildings, warming them with prayer and praise is lovely, beautiful and also a sign of hope to one and all. But there will be also an alternative. Excellent pre-recorded services, distributed before Sunday, to be watched at home, for the vulnerable and wisely wary and careful.

The 'virtual', pre-recorded version of this Sunday's sermon I delivered into a microphone to an empty church on Tuesday. Sunday's actual version is likely to evolve, mature and ripen into something

so eloquent, poetic, stirring, and profound during Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, that those present on Sunday will be sitting on the very edge of their pew in joyful anticipation. Dream on.

### **Sugar crusted chunks**

My son in Australia sent us a hamper of delicious tucker for Christmas. Included was a kilogram of crystalized ginger. How I love it. Decanted into two containers I crunched my way through one of them in a single day. No need to worry though. According to health food obsessives crystalized ginger relieves indigestion, nausea, colic, gas, heartburn, morning sickness, and motion sickness. It protects against ulcers and internal parasites, eases acid reflux and soothes coughs. As a compress it relieves sore muscles, stomach cramps, and swollen glands. On the other hand its sugar content is so high it increases the risk of heart disease, a variety of cancers and type 2 diabetes.

It's enough to make anyone dither, didder and dodder. Not me this time though. I've just helped myself to yet another handful of the sugar crusted nogs.

### **Mesmeric overdrive**

When Diana and I say matins each day, much of what we say is known by heart. It tempts us into mesmeric overdrive and an endless circuit of repetition. In the Te Deum a verse goes: *O Lord, save thy people, and bless thine heritage*. To which is the response *Govern them, and lift them up for ever*. Later on, in the versicles and responses there's the almost identical: *O Lord, save thy people and bless thine inheritance*. It is all too easy to jump back into the Te Deum and respond: *Govern them, and lift them up for ever* and so into an endless round of repetition. The angels fondly smile.

## **(381) "This and That" - 3 January 2021**

I write on the day my father died, Holy Innocent's Day, 28 December. It was way back in 2001 and he was living with us at the time. I noticed his bedroom light still on, early in the morning, well before dawn. There he lay, dead. Not at all unpeacefully. He was 89.

His name was David. The first psalm appointed to be read on the twenty eighth day of each month begins: *Lord remember David, and all his troubles...* I always do. Was I ever one of my father David's troubles? Rarely, if ever at all, I like to think.

### **Mawkish renditions**

We shared a passion for music and in my late teens and early twenties, together, built up a large record collection. His all time favourite was Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony". To recall him musically, on this his anniversary, I have just played a much shorter favourite: Albert the Prince Consort's Jubilate. He loved this jubilant piece and obtained the sheet music for his parish choir to sing.

He couldn't stand mawkishness. Nor can I. In music especially. Emotional renditions of songs, arias and the like, in which performers grimace, writhe, sway and sob their depths of feeling are truly horrible. My only criticism of this year's well nigh perfect King's College Chapel "Nine Lessons and Carols" was that one of the King's Singers was very slightly inclined to this form of egotism.

Blatant emotion is too easy to contrive. Emotional performances invite the audience to goggle not so much at the beauty of the music as at the performer's apparent depth of feeling. One of the most pleasing qualities in choir boys and choir girls is their impassivity. The music is allowed simply to be. To dazzle for what it is.

### **In a nut shell**

How sodden the countryside this Christmas. Our early morning walks require us to skirt innumerable black and sullen pools and ponds of gathered rainwater on the roads and lanes. When looked at attentively their sullen blackness is revelatory. It mirrors perfectly the crazy, sharp-elbowed, zig zag, tracteries of bare oak tree branches against the wintry sky.

*A man that looks on glass  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.*

This well known stanza from George Herbert's poem The Elixir, nut-shells the difference between the believer and the non-believer. The believer refuses to stay his eye upon what is merely evident, allowing it instead to pass into, through and beyond, and so the heaven espy.

### **Sodden world and leaking roof**

It is little wonder that our world is sodden. My rain gauge this year, to date, has recorded forty one inches of rain, seven of them in December. Because so many years of my life have been spent in hot climes, subject to prolonged and disastrous droughts, means that I rejoice in rain. Only the three and a half years on Tristan da Cunha, which averages over sixty inches a year, was anything like this year in Boldre. In Cumbria and western Scotland the total rainfall for 2020 must be massive. Kendal's annual average is sixty six inches.

On the Monday of Christmas week a leak developed in the Vicarage kitchen. We ventured out into a cold dawn's mizzle, identified the problem and with ingenuity and resourcefulness sufficient to dazzle Heath Robinson himself, set about solving it. We roped a tarpaulin from all four of its corners, folded it judiciously and then threw, pulled, jockeyed and manoeuvred it over the apex of the kitchen roof, with the aid of long bamboo canes, and tied it down secure enough to defy even storm "Bella". It was one of the week's minor highlights, getting us out and away from sedentary necessities like attending to the complicated logistics of Christmas pew-bookings, telephone calls, service planning, pew-sheet fiddling and sermonising.

### **A final word**

Human love, said Carlo Carretto, is a straight line, the union of two points in the space of the creature. Christian charity is a triangle.

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