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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (January 2023)



St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells, Somerset

*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 2023** 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>

(484) “This and That” - 22 January 2023

This is the last of my *This and That* columns from St John’s. They’ve evolved through previous parishes over many years. During the last nine, at Boldre, strait-jacketed into a single column of an oddly shaped pew-sheet. I’ve loved, and sometimes cursed, writing them.

Let me know

In them I’ve shared a judiciously censored version of myself, my faith and daily vicarage life. All as a way of conversing with each and every parishioner who deigns to read them, as well as past parishioners and friends. They’ve been a sort of home visit that even lockdown was unable to thwart. I shall miss writing them and may well take up my pen again, in some form or other, though without the spur of a weekly deadline, probably more erratically than heretofore. Those who would like to receive any such scribblings need to let me know. I shall no longer be using a parish database.

John the Baptist’s old dad

What I’ve been banging on about for all my years at St John’s, as well as throughout my priestly life, has been the believability, desirability and beauty of the Christian faith. John the Baptist’s old dad, Zechariah, says of his new born son, in a song we recite daily at matins: *...thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways*. This, my oldest friend, now a retired priest in Clacton on Sea reminds me, needs to be taken personally by parish priests. He’s right, and so I do.

Diana and I have been in Boldre for well over nine years. This is because we love its slightly down at heel, capacious vicarage and its leafy and secluded garden, its ancient St John’s church and peaceful St Nicholas’ chapel with their responsive congregations, and the New Forest and its rich variety of pigs, ponies, donkeys and denizens. Above all else, though, because called *to go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways*.

I believe in and deeply, deeply love the Christian faith and its Lord. Not easily, not superficially, not without doubt and struggle, not without sometimes suspecting it to be a charade and a nonsense, nor (heaven forfend) because paid to believe, or to say that I believe. After all, the last nine years have been unsalaried.

No, I believe rather, because, as the poet and priest R S Thomas, who so intriguingly hyphenates belief and doubt, absence and presence in his verse says: God is the presence who puzzles our mind but warms our heart and Jesus is the supreme metaphor for God.

The most striking symbol of all

To R S Thomas, it is the cross, Christianity’s “untenanted” cross, that is so compelling. In conversation with John McEllhenney he says: I can’t think of a more striking symbol in life than the cross.....it’s popular to suppose there is more substance in the other world religions than in Christianity. But it isn’t so, is it? He goes on to allude to the popularity of Eastern religions with pop stars, artists, and poets:the cross is more profound than anything in Buddhism or Taoism. I can’t think of a more striking symbol in life than the cross.

I agree. Sacrificing love, as so starkly, brutally and movingly depicted by the cross, is life’s *raison d’etre*, is what it’s all about, is why we are here, is the purpose of existence. Why do I exist? Not to be happy, but to learn to love like that, sacrificially.

Pietà

Always the same hills
Crowd the horizon,
Remote witness
Of the still scene.

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre, untenanted,
Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid's arms.

R S Thomas

Oh the faith, the faith, the faith. How I love it and its God. Hang on in there good people. Vicars might abandon you to head off to Cathedral cities, but God is present even in absence, belief in unbelief, faith in doubt and love, love, love is what it's all about.

The Farewell 'Sermon'

The priest who came nine years ago
Came sight unseen, on trust, you know
And could have proved a dire no, no,
An uncouth, awkward so and so,
To those disturbed or even riled
By clergy less than meek and mild.
Those disinclined to give their nod
To wild, colonial priests of God,
With racy views from far down under,
Like Boanerges, Sons of Thunder.

But one and all were soon disarmed,
Brought onsite, won over, charmed,
Their reservations all allayed.
For who could long remain dismayed.
At such a priest, the likes of him,
Six foot tall, his figure trim,
Sunburnt bronze and long of stride,
Full of bull, his smile wide,
Fighting fit and sound of limb,
Light-heartedness's synonym?
Just three years married to Diana,
Who, in her own distinctive manner,
Subdues his worst, inspires his best
And fills his soul with joy and zest.

An African-Australian-Brit
Much given to jokes and risqué wit,
Sesquipedalian, adjectival,
A joy in words that few can rival;
Provocative, a tad pugnacious
At bishop-baiting, bold, audacious.
In both his wives supremely blessed,
With four bright kids, who've flown the nest,
Depriving him of access to
Their youthful, sympathetic view
Of cultures popular and yob.
No social, just a culture snob.

In summer dress, a tad off beat,
(Those baggy shorts and sandalled feet)
He came in all his rude vulgarity
In part to test your Christian charity,
Inviting love of down and outs,
Beggars, ne'er do wells and louts,
Those scorned by prissy folk and prim,
As, too, are liberal priests like him.

A friend of doubt and paradox
Hard to pigeon hole or box,
A priest who certainty disdains,
From facile platitudes abstains,

Who welcomes incongruity
And feels at home with ambiguity.
Thick of skin, but also sensitive,
Impulsive, yes, but also tentative.
Distinctly trad liturgically,
Yet liberal theologically.
A melancholic optimist,
A happy, joyful pessimist,
Even tempered, yet dyspeptic,
On nearly everything a skeptic.
But loving Jesus, Church and creed.
A walking paradox indeed.
Disliking happy clappy loons,
And facile choruses and tunes,
Yet prone at times to compromise,
To his and everyone's surprise.

In grief and sorrow, self-contained,
Emotionally well restrained,
Yet sharing of himself as well
And telling all there is to tell
Of what he thinks and reads and eats,
In sermons, verse and strong pew-sheets.

As time's rolled on and years increased
He's touched to learn you love this priest.
You egg him on, affirm, support,
Accept him, back him, rarely thwart
Even his most crazy schemes,
Daft opinions, hopeless dreams,
Excusing any goofs and gaffes
Or suspect jokes with friendly laughs.

So as he ponders and reflects,
Surveys his faith, his life inspects,
He takes delight that faith and years
Have brought him far more joy than tears.
That God has blessed a hundredfold
This sinful, seventy seven year old
With favours numerous and lavish,
Especially this most pleasing parish.
What better place to age and moulder
Than good St John the Baptist Boldre?
What better, lovely culmination
To a lifelong priest's vocation,
Than such a church in such a place?
Such an awesome, grace-filled space,
Where this priest of long years standing
Has made the very softest landing.
His priestly life and Christian creed
Have granted to him much indeed.

Not least today, just being here
Among good folk who hold him dear.

May St John's forever flourish
And always fortify and nourish
Everyone in its vicinity,
Never losing an affinity
With all the breadth of human kind.
May every passing person find,
Saint or sinner, rich or poor,
Its friendly, daily opened door
An invitation into peace,
Quiet contentment and release.

And may St John's remain unique,
One-off, distinct, a tad oblique,
Resisting moves to vandalise it,
Rip out pews and modernise it.
Nor give way to populism
And lowbrow forms of barbarism,
But rather and instead endeavour,
Hopefully, we trust, forever,

To make its overriding mission
To breathe new life into tradition,
Our ancient rites perform with dash
The Faith proclaim with bold panache.
Its organ always spark and fire,
A four part, keen, melodious choir,
As dazzling flowers lift the heart,
And bells peal out before we start.
God's love apparent all around
As warmth and friendliness abound.
Thus may St John's forever be
The heart of its community
As dear to you as dear to me.
A place for all to love and be.

And though, for me, this chapter's told,
Don't think I'm done for, finished, old.
Bulldust! Let's have none of that!!
To prove it, here, I've learned off pat,
A last brief sermon.....

*"Life's no Bitch!
Shot through with God, how rich, how rich!"*

THANK YOU FROM DIANA AND ANDREW

I begin sermons with the words: "In the Name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen." This is to subdue the ego by reminding myself, let alone others, that I am not to talk about the endlessly fascinating (to myself), Andrew David Irwin Neaum, but about, and on behalf of God and the Gospel.

Shamelessly autobiographical.

The perceptive will have noticed that last Sunday, for the very first time in Boldre, I began: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and our Redeemer ...". This is because the sermon wasn't really a sermon at all, it was a shamelessly autobiographical, self indulgent, 777-word, one-sided piece of light verse. It was more in the name of Andrew, father, husband and egotist, than the Holy and Blessed Trinity. In the last couplet, though, God was granted a rousing look-in. The better part of me trusts that the applause that followed was directed to the God of that last couplet, the egotist was gratifyingly confident it was not.

Good humour, gaiety and gratitude.

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the happiness of a day that both Diana and I had more than half-dreaded, because leaving those you love is exceedingly fraught. However, in characteristic St John's style, it was all managed with good humour, gaiety and gratitude. Thank you to those who contributed to a wonderful and heart-warming occasion by organising it all so thoroughly, expertly and, to Diana and myself, covertly. Thank you to everyone for attending in such large numbers, including one of our past wedding couples all the way from Ross on Wye with their fine little boys. Thank you to those who contributed to a wildy generous cash gift that will finance a planned trip to see the Australian part of our family later in the year. Thank you for all the cards, good wishes, emails and gifts of many and varied sorts, including a verse by John James, and another from David Woodgates. Thank you to the fine catering team for a truly splendid, bounteous meal and for lashings of wine. Thank you to the choir for their amusing and so witty skits at the luncheon, and later for a wondrous choral Evensong which Wells Cathedral will never be able to live up to. A jubilant and hugely augmented choir gloriously rumbled the rafters and in singing the tune 'Hursley' to "Sun of My Soul", descant and all, pricked my eyes with tears, bringing back to mind Rhodesian Evensongs with my Father as choirmaster, priest, and preacher, singing his heart out to that most lovely tune.

Such a rich mix of saints and sinners.

It was gratitude that dominated the whole day though, not grief or nostalgia. Gratitude from Diana and myself to God and to each and everyone for nine wonderful years. Gratitude from all of you to God and indeed to Diana and myself for putting up with you all so easily and happily. What a rich and satisfying mix of saints, sinners, believers, doubters ratbags, scallywags and supportive friends. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

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