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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE



St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells, Somerset

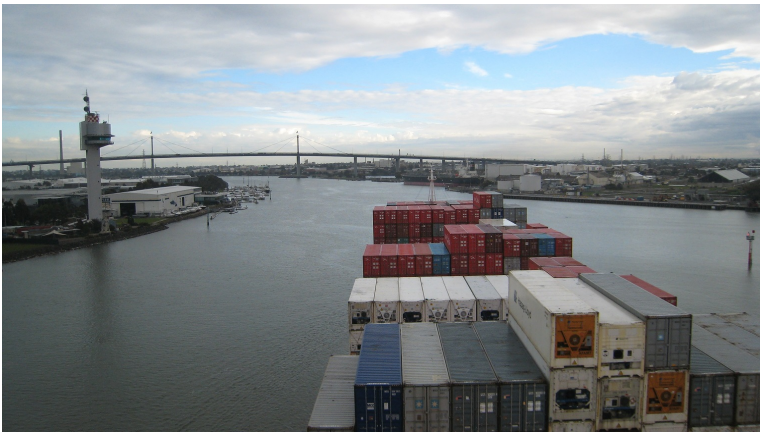
St Andrew's Cathedral Wells, Somerset

The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired, with much gratitude and many regrets as the "House for Duty" Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice at the end of January 2023 to the centre of the Cathedral City of Wells in Somerset. The articles that follow are the continuation of his weekly pew-sheet ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations written in the study, situated on the landing behind the stairwell's balustrade of his new house in Wells.

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

(508) “This and That” - 30 July 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Leaving Melbourne

In 2013 a large, red container ship, registered in Monrovia, owned by Hamburg Sud and called *Bahia*, eased itself away from a Melbourne dock, assisted by a pair of tugs, passed slowly beneath the great Westgate Bridge and steamed steadily into Port Phillip Bay. The Captain was Polish, the Officers Eastern Europeans and the crew Filipinos. There were also two passengers settling into the plain but spacious, en suite ‘owner’s cabin’, dead centre beneath the bridge. Through its window they looked out and over

the full length of the broad-beamed vessel and all its containers, to the bow forging towards ‘The Rip’, the dangerous, narrow entrance to Bass Strait from the Bay.

The two passengers were a newly retired Australian priest and his wife, at the beginning of a long and leisurely journey across the Pacific, through the Panama Canal to Philadelphia and then, eight days later, across the Atlantic to Antwerp, not on a container ship this time, but a general freighter after which, by car, ferry and car again, they found their way to the Vicarage of St John’s Church, Boldre, on Pilley Hill in the New Forest, to take up residence as the semi-retired ‘house for duty’ priest in charge.

Barging about

Ten years later, in 2023, a large, red, broad-beamed barge, registered, I should think, in Bath, owned by the Bath Canal Boat Company and called *Grand Cru*, eased away from its berth at Bathampton, assisted by a mighty human shove, to putter, ever so slowly, along the Kennet and Avon canal towards Devises. The skipper was the omni-competent David Neaum who achieved his master’s ticket after a mere twenty minute tutorial from the vessel’s amiable owner. His crew of five were an Australian, English and American mix, ranging in age from nine years to seventy seven. This was no footling narrow boat, it was a luxury, wide-beamed craft, with a brick built fireplace, two double cabins and a large living area that cunningly doubled as a comfortable double sleeper, with a kitchen attached. The aim was to travel to the foot of the Caen Hill flight of 29 locks to renew our acquaintance with them from some years before by way of a mere passing car, and then to return to Bathampton, all within two full days and three nights.

Barges, like container ships, are controlled and steered from the back. As we stood at the tiller and managed the throttle, looking over and down the whole length of the barge to its bow, and because this particular barge was a similar colour to our container ship, and likewise more than usually broad of beam and exceedingly slow to respond to changes of direction, it proved to be surprisingly and incongruously reminiscent of our trans Pacific journey.

We had complete access to the Bridge on *Bahia*, spending much time there and so were no strangers to what controlling and directing such vessels is like. Moreover that 2012 oceanic voyage also included its very own canal trip through Panama, with alligators sunbathing along the banks and a tiny Panamanian pilot in control of the vessel but, essentially, not all that different from this 2023 English summer’s canal venture. On the Panama, as with the *Grand Cru* on the Kennet and Avon, each lock could accommodate only one oversized vessel such as ours at a time. The principle of filling and emptying an enclosed space to rise and fall was exactly the same for both canals though and in its effective but primitive simplicity delighted us, possibly more so on the Kennet and Avon, because we ourselves operated the opening of the locks’ sluices and gates.

How delightfully alike to the unlike is so much of human experience, if only we take time to make the connection.

Eye level with ducks, dragonflies and platypuses

With us on the Kennet and Avon was my son Peter. He lives in Albury, a large town on the banks of Australia's longest river, a few miles below the mighty Hume Dam. It was fitting to arrange an English canal trip for him to enjoy because he, in years gone by, arranged several expeditions for us on the Murray, one of them in particular not entirely dissimilar.

In 2011 he took us by car out of Albury up the river Murray to a spot below the Hume Dam wall where, clad only in swimming costumes and upon a large black inner tube each, we pushed off into the river and began a tranquil drift downstream, all the way back to Albury. It necessitated an all but total surrender of agency and control to an elemental force, the mighty Murray, bracingly cool and seemingly sluggish though the fast recession of river banks and trees indicated a speed two or three times that of our barge on the Kennet and Avon. It was as wondrous and refreshing as the surrender of arid unbelief to life-enhancing faith. We were at one with the river, at eye level with ducks, dragonflies and platypuses, drifting, drifting, drifting in wonderment, joy and bright sunlight to a destination far less important than the journey itself.

Arguments that cannot be proven

The unhurried putt putt up and down a portion of the Kennet and Avon brought back to Diana and myself that gentle, mesmeric drift down the Murray River. Walkers along the towpath overtook us as we quietly chugged along, ducks with tiny ducklings in their wake paddled along ahead and beside us unperturbed, deer in passing woodland browsed without giving us a glance. My pacemaker began to synch with the gentle, quiet beat of the engine. Reflective peace, tranquillity and blessed memories settled upon us. There is something about canal travel, be it on foot or barge, as the last few lines of a poem by Patrick Kavanagh indicate:

Canal Bank Walk

... O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses, give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech
For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.

Adrift, nettled and brambled

There were dramatic moments too. Moored below the lock at Bradford on Avon, I was left aboard to wash and tidy up while the others went off to explore a local Tythe Barn. As I pottered about I heard concerned voices outside and someone shouted that I was adrift. Earlier, while moored, we had been biffed by another barge and it had loosened our pegs. Had it not been for the help of neighbourly fellow travellers, I'd have found myself well and truly adrift with little idea as to how to start the engine, let alone turn the vessel around to find my shipmates.



As we approached our final night's mooring it was my task to stand with the rope on the bow's gunnel and leap ashore when close enough to do so. To my horror it proved to be a leap into a thicket of nettles and brambles. Should I baulk or leap? I leapt, in my shorts, and have bramble scored legs to prove it, but it meant a secure mooring close to a fine pub which we patronised. Such are the rewards from the leap of faith.

(507) “This and That” - 23 July 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



An arrogant, bully boy of a herring gull (*larus argentatus*) is the self-styled lord and master of Chamberlain Street, here in Wells. He stands sentinel on the stone cross of the roof on the Roman Catholic church for hours at a time, squinting superciliously down its bright yellow beak, at all who pass by. From my study desk, through the window, I admire him over the 20 foot stone wall at the bottom of our flower filled little garden

Wild orchids of the sea

Dazzling silver and white in sunshine, he bickers and snickers unmusically to himself and, like a slave master of old, looks down contemptuously upon the black jackdaws and grey pigeons lining the roof's apex beneath him. He knows me well too, and doesn't like what he sees. I mimic his bickering and snickering as we walk to church up Chamberlain Street each morning, whereupon he leaps from his throne to swoop us with angry squawks. I will win him over eventually, for I'm a sociable, communicative sort and love these incongruously graceful garbage-guzzling omnivores, so far from their true bailiwick the sea.

No clay-born lilies of the world

Could blow as free

As those wild orchids of the sea.

Once arrived and seated in the Cathedral's Lady Chapel, as often as not, there is a hairy little terrier called *Jacques* to celebrate the Eucharist with us. If the intercessions ramble on too long for a restless mind to bear and if the lovely mosaics of stained glass shards in the windows dim to dullness in gloomy weather, he becomes a focus of interest and speculation. He's of a meditative disposition, his eyes dreamily vacant while at worship and whenever a happy thought or memory passes through his little canine mind, it is acknowledged by four of five gentle waves of his tail pennant. Dog-friendly celebrants give him a Franciscan blessing at the distribution of Communion. On the way out, walking behind him down the long and pillared ambulatory of the Cathedral, we notice that he appreciatively sniffs an ancient pillar or two and then cocks his leg, pungently to baptize venerable stones that have endured and witnessed far worse down through the centuries. It's a rather less than pleasing consequence of dog-happy times.

Feline friendly

There is a cathedral cat too, usually encountered in the entrance foyer and cloisters. The friendly folk who attempt to elicit “donations” from visitors to the cathedral have laid out a towel on their desk for her to slumber upon. Her real home is elsewhere and, like us, she comes across early. When our arrivals coincide she implores us to grant her entrance through the automatic door that doesn't respond to her diminutive size or through one of the windows she nuzzles expectantly.

Possibly the most celebrated of all Cathedral cats was one closely associated with Southwark Cathedral, a small half-Abyssinian called *Doorkins Magnificat*. Before she got religion she was a feral predator in Borough Market, “admired by the beadles and traders for her ferocity, tenacity and devotion to the swift dispatch and devouring of vermin” writes Peter Ross in his book *Steeple Chasing*. She had

....an active social media presence and a popular range of merchandise..... She was part brand ambassador, part evangelist, part gateway drug. “People come to the cathedral to see Doorkins” says Jon Dollin, the Cathedral's retail and visitor services manager and the cat's ‘voice’ on Twitter. “For some people, crossing that threshold is really difficult. But Doorkins makes it more accessible. I don't want to say that the majority of visitors come here to see the cat, but she's certainly helped people get over their fear of coming into the church.”

Titania's wings and Yorick's skull

When *Doorkins Magnificat* died it was decided to hold a Thanksgiving Service in her honour, much to the perturbation of some of those kill-joy wowsers who so tarnish the Church's reputation with their meanness of spirit. It took place, writes Peter Ross:

.....on a sunny but cold afternoon. Thirty of us had gathered – the maximum number allowed for funerals under Covid restrictions – and were seated on plastic chairs in the nave. Candles were lit on the altar and there was a great stillness in that great space; in no sense was this occasion ironic or kitsch or lacking in dignity. It was a farewell to a friend. Sunlight shone through the Shakespeare window – through Titania's wings and Yorick's skull and Prospero's golden cloak – and cast dappled colours on the old stone. The Dean, in a black cassock, rose to speak. In its long history, he observed, Southwark Cathedral had hosted memorial services for the great and good, as well as funerals for ordinary people from the parish, but he rather doubted that they had ever before had a service for a cat: "Some may think that cats don't deserve ceremonies and eulogies and prayers, that their death should pass without comment or occasion. But I can't agree. this little cat who arrived at our door, who chose us and stayed, changed our lives and enhanced our mission and ministry. She did more to bring people to this place than I will ever do." It was a beautiful ceremony. Readings and psalms. A member of the choir sang of Pangur Ban and the scribe. A poem in the order of service noted that Doorkins had not been 'domesticated but church'd' – which sounded about right. The occasion was live-streamed for those who wanted to be there but couldn't, provoking an intense emotional reaction from huge numbers of people who had never met Doorkins. One vicar in Nottinghamshire commented that she hadn't been able to cry for her aunt, at whose funeral she had officiated, but had been in bits crying for the cat. "It's ok if you don't get it," she wrote online, "it's ok if you think it's silly, but for me this helped, it really helped." The air was swollen with grief and had been for months. The death of Doorkins was a purging. The dean, in his homily, reflected on Adam naming the animals: "As soon as you give them a name, you give them something fundamental: a character, a presence, almost a personality." Part of the power of the Doorkins story, he said, was what it had to teach us about how to treat strangers in need of kindness and welcome. He remembered, in his closing prayer, four migrants – two children and their parents – who had died the day before when their boat sank while crossing the English Channel from France. They were thought to be Kurdish-Iranian but their names were not yet known. At the close of the service, Paul Timms carried the remains of Doorkins in a small wooden casket, bowing to the altar as he passed. Following him, we walked out of the cathedral, into the train noise and market smells and the wind that whirled fallen leaves, and the verger laid her in the earth – that body which had once ratted and slunk and pounced and dozed, and delighted so many with its evident grace. She lies by the churchyard wall, across from the door where she first came in; the door from which she took her final name."*

*** Pangur Ban and the scribe: A delightful poem from about the 9th century about a monk-scribe and his pet cat*

Steeple Chasing: Around Britain by Church by Peter Ross
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(506) “This and That” - 16 July 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



The Market Square Wells

At choral evensong in the Cathedral recently we sang the hymn *O Happy Band of Pilgrims*. Geographically my own pilgrimage began in rural Staffordshire, moved on to Tristan da Cunha, back to a country town in Derbyshire, on to two different bush mission stations in Rhodesia, to a Harare suburb, a variety of bachelor digs in London, a university town in South Africa, back to Harare’s city centre, on to a Zimbabwean country town, then to St Helena Island, briefly to Bournemouth, on to an Australian village and three Australian country towns in succession, back to a Hampshire village in England and finally to the Cathedral city of Wells, to live happily a while longer and then, hopefully, to die in peace.

The trials that beset you

Geographically it has been a wondrous pilgrimage. Spiritually it has had both highs and lows, domestically and emotionally likewise, a mixture of deep happinesses and profound sadnesses, as is the human lot. It has been good, though, to have the Christian Faith as the journey’s ground bass, validating and authenticating it as a purposive pilgrimage. It’s always been moving on and travelling towards a holy place, its ultimate destination, taken on trust, to be unimaginably more than bleak annihilation.

One verse of *O Happy Band of Pilgrims* I have by heart and often quote when faced with a daunting task or trial, jocularly and with rueful irony because the answer or cure offered by the hymn is a tad drastic:

*The trials that beset you,
The sorrows ye endure.
The manifold temptations
That Death alone can cure...*

The version we sang in the Cathedral included two verses that most hymnals omit and one of them gave pause for an irreverent thought of the sort that grounds worshippers from soaring too close to heaven:

*What are they but forerunners
To lead you to his sight?
What are they save the effluence
Of uncreated light?*

Suitable for a service in honour of our Water Companies in the United Kingdom, plagued as they are by problems to do with sewage disposal. It is a fine hymn though, one I’ve enjoyed all my life and sang regularly on Tristan da Cunha, my mother accompanying, on a wheezing, asthmatic harmonium, a congregation of islanders who, on that wet and windy fastness and in synch with the instrument, suffered from a higher than normal incidence of asthma.

The author of the hymn’s words is Saint Joseph the Hymnographer (816-866), “the sweet-voiced nightingale of the Church,” one of the greatest liturgical poets and hymnographers of the Eastern

Orthodox Communion. He was born in Sicily, but fled an Arab invasion and on his pilgrimage to fame and sanctity spent several years enslaved. He escaped, with divine intervention, to become an admired monk and priest, though from contemporary records it is difficult to disentangle history from legend, and biography from hagiography.

He is to be revered not only for hymnody and a love of music, but also for his opposition to iconoclasm. Here in Wells the lower-level niches for statues in the stunning west front of the Cathedral are empty, thanks to the depredations of Cromwell's fanatical, iconoclastic followers. Bishop Joseph Hall (1574-1656) of Norwich tells us what it was like when troops and citizens, encouraged by a Parliamentary decree against superstition and idolatry, took matters into their own hands:

Lord what work was here! What clattering of glasses! What beating down of walls! What tears up of monuments?! What pulling down of seats! What wresting out of irons and brass from the windows! What defacing of arms! What demolishing of curious stonework! What tooting and piping upon organ pipes! And what a hideous triumph in the marketplace before all the country, when all the mangled organ pipes, vestments, both copes and surplices, together with the leaden cross which had newly been sawn down from the Green-yard pulpit and the service-books and singing books that could be carried to the fire in the public marketplace were heaped together.....

The Byzantine Church of St Joseph the Hymnographer's time was suffering from the second wave of a similar sort of violent iconoclasm. He was a noted and eloquent opponent of the movement.

Gamekeepers or the devil

Sermons on sin tend to be dull, dreary and predictable. They are all but guaranteed to send listeners to dreamland. The very word "sin" is such a turn-off I much prefer the term "trespasses" in the Lord's Prayer to its replacement word "sins" in all the new versions. Sins are too closely associated with the dubious notion of hellfire, trespasses far less so. Gamekeepers, even with guns, are preferable to the devil.

In Wales and the English counties abutting that fair land, there occurred until not all that long ago, strange fringe-dwellers called "*Sin Eaters*". The seventeenth-century diarist John Aubrey (1626-1697) tells us that in Herefordshire there was an old custom at funerals:

....to hire poor people, who were to take upon themselves all the sinnes of the party deceased. One of them I remember lived in a Cottage on Rosse-highway. (He was a long, lean, ugly, lamentable Raskel.) The manner was that when the Corps was brought out of the house, and layd on the Biere; a Loafe of bread was brought out, and delivered to the Sinne-eater over the Corps, and also a Mazar-bowl of maple (Gossips bowle) full of beer, which he was to drinke up, and sixpence in money, in consideration whereof he took upon him (ipso facto) all the Sinnes of the Defunct, and freed him (or her) from walking after they were dead.

Much later, a 1926 book of Funeral Customs by Bertram S. Puckle also touches on sin-eaters:

Professor Evans of the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen, allegedly saw a sin-eater about the year 1825, who was then living near Llanwenog, Cardiganshire. Abhorred by the superstitious villagers as a thing unclean, the sin-eater cut himself off from all social intercourse with his fellow creatures by reason of the life he had chosen; he lived as a rule in a remote place by himself, and those who chanced to meet him avoided him as they would a leper. This unfortunate was held to be the associate of evil spirits, and given to witchcraft, incantations and unholy practices; only when a death took place did they seek him out, and when his purpose was accomplished they burned the wooden bowl and platter from which he had eaten the food handed across, or placed on the corpse for his consumption.

Eating your word and sins

Sermonisers, when tempted to preach about and condemn sin, should eat their own words to become twenty-first century sin-eaters.



Wells Cathedral, West End

(505) “This and That” - 9 July 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Dog collars moulder in my cupboard. My cassocks, surplices and stoles, undisturbed, provide sustenance for moths. My printer has forgotten how to print anything, let alone sermons and pew sheets.

In purdah

Newly retired clergy are sent into purdah for six months. Although granted a certificate of “Permission to Officiate” as a priest in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, I am not allowed to do so for six months. It’s a sensible restriction that allows newly retired parsons to become accustomed to and even enjoy, irrelevance, insignificance, idleness and anonymity. My release from purdah comes on the first of August whereupon, if I so wish, I can signify my availability to the Area Dean and discuss with him what, if anything, I would like to do round and about this part of the diocese.

While irrelevance, anonymity and insignificance have been mildly troubling to my egotistical self, the biggest challenge has been what to wear. The choice for day by day gear has been a mere degree or two less than scruffy: sandals, baggy shorts and short-sleeved shirts. On Sundays it has been smart slacks and a long sleeved, open necked shirt. To our first dinner party I put on a tie, an adornment not worn for a hundred years, it required untying and retying several times to get to the right length. I was the only person at the party wearing one, to their shame not mine, I fondly imagine, but of course not. A cravat would have been more original, impressively retro and worthy of comment.

Croats and cravats

Cravats originate in Croatia, where October 18 is celebrated as “Cravat Day” and in the capital Zagreb, there is a *Cravat Academy* dedicated to promoting the cravat, and its derivative equivalents, such as ties, for being “*symbols of universal human values and the foundation of modern civilisation*”. It takes my mind back to a favourite, light green cravat I wore to dances and smart functions during my university years in Rhodesia, stylishly arranged beneath my beard. It was the antithesis of cool in tropical summers, sweating up and steaming my elegant Adam’s apple.

Croat and *cravat*, are variations of the same word because cravats, as neck adornments, came to the notice of Western Europe in the 17th century by way of Croatian mercenaries employed by Louis XIV of France. They enlisted wearing a necktie called a *tour de cou*, traditional Croat military gear. These picturesque scarves, distinctively knotted, aroused such Parisian curiosity and admiration they were immediately and widely imitated. Initially termed *croats* the word, over time, was corrupted to *cravats*. People of high rank and great wealth wore fine, silken specimens, their ends embroidered or trimmed with broad lace; those of more lowly folk were made of cloth, cotton, or plaited black taffeta tied round the neck by two small strings.

The feisty, eighteenth century celebrity, actress, poet, dramatist and novelist Mary Robinson (1757-1800), for a time the mistress of King George IV, wrote a matching pair of poems, both of which mention cravats, here are the first three verses of each:

Male Fashions for 1799

*Crops like hedgehogs, high-crown'd hats,
Whispers like Jew Moses;
Padded collars, thick cravats,
And cheeks as red as roses.*

*Faces painted pink and brown ;
Waistcoats striped and gaudy ;
Sleeves thrice doubled thick with down,
And straps to brace the body.*

*Short great-coats that reach the knees,
Boots like French postillion ;
Worn the German race to please,
But laugh'd at by the million.....*

Female Fashions for 1799

*A form, as any taper, fine;
A head like half-pint bason;
Where golden cords, and bands entwine,
As rich as fleece of Jason.*

*A pair of shoulders strong and wide,
Like country clown enlisting;
Bare arms long dangling by the side,
And shoes of ragged listing!*

*Cravats like towels, thick and broad,
Long tippetts made of bear-skin,
Muffs that a RUSSIAN might applaud,
And rouge to spoil a fair skin.....*

The finest of all cravats are feathered and worn by that most chipper of chirrupers, the Robin.

Puckering and pickling

Foot gear, as well as neck gear, exercises the mind of liturgically minded priests. When gliding the sanctuary wreathed in incense the most favoured footwear of all, to the likes of me, is none. I was ordained in the Diocese of Mashonaland where the vast majority of indigenous country folk wandered around unshod. The sides of the soles of their feet were as fissured as the west coast of New Zealand's South Island, a small price to pay for liberation from the brutal incarceration of shoes that cramp and disfigure the toes as they pucker and pickle them in their odoriferous, sauna-hot gaol. Barefoot is best, second best is sandals.

In the Cathedral of St Mary and All Saint's, Harare, where I served my first three years as deacon and priest, black shoes were de rigeur in the sanctuary. Brown footwear, trainers, sneakers, sandals, let alone bare feet, were totally forbidden. Only when I became a parish priest and master of my own church sanctuary did I begin to favour sandalled feet and, for weekday services, bare feet. My young daughters once painted my toenails as I slept, to the subsequent mild amusement of those kneeling at the rail to receive Communion. Had I been more liturgically adept this would have marked the beginning of a seasonal toenail adornment: purple for Advent and Lent, red for Pentecost, gold for Easter and so on.

Discalced

There is a branch of the Carmelite Monastic Order, founded in the 16th century, known as the "Discalced Carmelites". The word discalced means unshod or barefooted, one of their characteristics. This provides a precedent for discarding the black-shoes-only rule in favour of bare feet or sandals in the sanctuary. There is a far older and greater precedent. To be barefooted at the altar, in the presence of God, is to stand alongside barefooted Moses before the burning bush, in the Sinai desert.



(504) “This and That” - 2 July 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Aristotle was all set to open this week’s effusion. Before he could manage a look in, however, my magpie mind began to muse upon and play around with the sound of his name and to rummage for rhymes. The best of these being ‘dottle’, which took me back to my pipe-smoking father. It was a favoured word of his, useful for being the plug of unburnt tobacco and ash left in the bottom of a pipe once it has been smoked, sometimes tacky with saliva and tar. .

Cycling to school smoking a pipe

I miss the comforting, avuncular presence of pipe-smoking men and the satisfying aroma of Latakia tobacco. Not always men though, my mother smoked a pipe for a while, as did my brother and I as boys. We were given permission to smoke at home, only so long as it was a pipe and not cigarettes. When my brother left me behind as a boarder at Guinea Fowl Boys High School, to complete my final year, while he himself became a day scholar at Churchill Boy’s High School in Harare for his two sixth form years, the school authorities there took exception to him cycling to classes contentedly puffing his pipe.

That was not quite the end of my Aristotelian musing. The name went on to remind me of *Bruce’s Song*, composed by Eric Idle for the Monty Python team. The singers of the song were fictitious Australian university lecturers, all called ‘Bruce’ and hailing from the University of Woollloomooloo, an actual suburb of Sydney, but one with no university.

*Immanuel Kant was a real pissant
Who was very rarely stable,
Heidegger, Heidegger was a boozy beggar
Who could think you under the table,
David Hume could out-consume,
Schopenhauer and Hegel.
And Wittgenstein was a beery swine
Who was just as schloshed as Schlegel.
There's nothing Nietzsche
Couldn't teach ya
'Bout the raising of the wrist.
Socrates himself was permanently pissed.
John Stuart Mill, of his own free will
On half a pint of shandy was particularly ill.
Plato, they say could stick it away,
Half a crate of whisky everyday.*

*Aristotle, Aristotle was a bugger for the bottle,
Hobbes was fond of his dram,
And René Descartes was a drunken fart
"I drink, therefore I am."*

*Yes, Socrates himself is particularly missed,
A lovely little thinker but a bugger when he's pissed.*

How funny that seems to me, though I suppose it shouldn't. We assume these days that Chaucerian earthiness is a good and healthy thing and Victorian prudishness deplorable. Nonetheless, it will be a sad day for humour, righteous anger and creative insult when society has finally become so coarse, crude and shameless that there are no words left that can shock us.

Bridges built with lies

Few figures of speech give as much pleasure as an arresting simile or metaphor. Take for example this simile from a book I've just finished: ".....the holy island of Lindisfarnehas a reputation as a 'thin place' – where the space between this world and the next is like a newborn's fontanelle: fragile, pulsing, not quite closed." Wondrous.

In the days when I read serious books I came across one that contrasted the "illuminating falsehood of metaphors with the trivial truthfulness of similes". Similes, by using either the word *like* or *as*, merely compare two objects: we are as busy *as* a bee, we sleep *like* a log, we are not actually identified with either of them, hence their "trivial truthfulness".

Metaphors, on the other hand, taken literally, are almost invariably false, not true. In a favourite T S Eliot poem, the dithering *J Alfred Prufrock*, claims "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons". This, literally, is an obvious falsehood, but as a metaphor it is so sharp and right, we grasp immediately the truth it is intended to convey. Hence the "illuminating falsehood of metaphors". They lead us towards the truth "across bridges built with lies". There are profound and wonderful truths impossible to articulate in strict scientific discourse, as any serious reader of the bible knows.

A constipated civil servant

It takes us five minutes to walk to choral evensong in the Cathedral, but I am prepared to travel further on occasions. Some years ago it was all the way to Cambridge to hear the left wing literary scholar and cultural theorist, Professor Terry Eagleton preach. It was worth it. I love Eagleton because, like him, it is Jesus the maverick, Jesus the larrikin, Jesus the radical, Jesus the challenger of authority, Jesus the purported wine-bibber and glutton, Jesus the lover of outcasts, publicans and sinners who I admire, dearly love and know, know, know, to offer the only satisfactory answer to the riddle of human existence. Here is Terry Eagleton on how we've got morality wrong:

....the idea that evil is glamorous is one of the great moral mistakes of the modern age. (When I told my young son that I was writing a book on evil he replied, "Wicked!") I have written elsewhere on how this mistake may have arisen. Once the middle classes get their hands on virtue, even vice begins to look appealing. Once the puritan propagandists and evangelical mill owners redefine virtue as thrift, prudence, chastity, abstinence, sobriety, meekness, frugality, obedience, and self-discipline, it is not hard to see why evil should begin to look like a sexier option. As with the magnificent music of Adrian Leverkühn, the devil seems to have all the best tunes. Suburban virtue is a poor thing compared to Satanic vice. We would all rather have a drink with Dickens's Fagin or Emily Bronte's Heathcliff than a chat with the God of John Milton's Paradise Lost, who speaks like a constipated civil servant. Everyone loves a rogue.

So do I, so do I. Jesus was one such! A rogue, but in the most attractive, distinctive, challenging, courageous and altogether original of ways.



Saints Church Gatooma

(503) “This and That” - 25 June 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-84) observed that Sunday “....*should be different from another day. People may walk, but not throw stones at birds. There may be relaxation, but there should be no levity.*”

Andrew Neaum (1945-20??) observes that Sunday at St John’s Boldre was indeed different from another day. It was the one day of the week that he didn’t walk, but nor did he relax, let alone throw stones at birds. Levity there was aplenty though, especially at the church door after services.

Blue laws and blue noses

Dr Johnson’s observation was merely advisory. Actual laws restricting activities on Sundays, particularly in America, are known as “Blue Laws”, a term thought to have been coined by the Reverend Samuel Peters (1735-1826). He was an Anglican priest in Connecticut hostile to the cause of American independence and compelled to flee to London where, in 1781, he published a *“General History of Connecticut”*. The book is contemptuous of the colonists and contains tall stories and derogatory tales about them, as well as a fabricated list of 45 harsh laws to discredit the colonists as backward and fanatical.

Law no 18: No one shall run on the Sabbath day, or walk in his garden or elsewhere, except reverently to and from meeting. Law no 19: No one shall travel, cook victuals, make beds, sweep house, cut hair, or shave, on the Sabbath day. Law no 20: No woman shall kiss her child on the Sabbath or fasting day. Law No 21: The Sabbath shall begin at sunset on Saturday.

Samuel Peters didn’t actually invent the term “Blue Laws”, he helped popularise it. Its most likely origin is an older American compound adjective “blue-nosed” to characterise puritans, prudes and prigs. People from Nova Scotia are also known as “blue-noses”, due probably to the effect of extreme cold on their nostrils. They have turned a derisive insult on its head by proudly appropriating it.

Murmurous bees and flamboyant trees

Sundays are very different for a fully retired clergyman. He returns to pre-ordination pew-sitting and in my case with pleasure, I love going to church and I settle down in a pew with a sigh of satisfaction. Last Sunday, in the Cathedral, there were two particular high moments. The first was my favourites hymn, sung to the tune *Hereford*. I love both the words and the tune and, as a newly married, young priest, included the words in two notebooks of favourite prayers that I compiled for my wife and

self to use in our private devotions. Last Sunday I found it difficult to sing the hymn because of the great wave of nostalgia that overwhelmed me. I was transported back to All Saints' Church in Gatooma, Rhodesia, my very first parish and to its lovely Rectory alongside, sited on a street lined with glorious flamboyant trees. Outside the open window of the church's little chapel, where I recited the daily Office and said my prayers, was a great gum tree that nostalgia declares to have been permanently in flower, alive with contented, shimmering, murmurous, industrious bees:

O Thou who comes from above+
The fire celestial to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart....

A mad, bad bishop and crazy diocese

The second of last Sunday's high moments occurred once the choir had returned to their stalls after communicating. They sang to perfection Elgar's simple, widely familiar and well loved *Ave Verum Corpus*. It was originally composed as a *Pie Jesu* and only years later reincarnated, by Elgar himself, as *Ave Verum*. This time nostalgia swept me back to the Diocese of Ballarat in Australia, to my Canon's stall in the lovely, though modestly small Cathedral. The Bishop's chaplain and also Cathedral musical director was a young priest called Peter Treloar, a talented fellow who had met us on our arrival at Melbourne airport in 1985. His small, amateur but accomplished Cathedral choir often sang the piece on diocesan occasions.

What a crazy diocese it was. The Bishop was a mad, bad, eloquent, gifted, flamboyant, whisky addicted, ultra Anglo Catholic called John Hazlewood. He surrounded himself and began to fill the diocese with young, exceedingly Anglo Catholic clergy, many of them refugees from the ultra protestant and indeed Calvinistic Diocese of Sydney, still a thorn in the side of worldwide Anglicanism. He was a risk-taker of a bishop, prepared to take a punt on odd balls from exotic places, like a friend of mine called Warwick Willows from Zimbabwe and myself, on Warwick's enthusiastic recommendation, from the island of St Helena.

Platypuses and smoked eel

They were exciting times, my first parish was on the edge of Victoria's Western Plains, its centre was the village of Skipton, 52 kilometres west of Ballarat, with a population of about 600. The church was lovely, so too the village and we boasted a four part choir, healthy Sunday congregations and a daily Eucharist. Sunday services, always with clouds of incense, were followed by nibbles and several glasses of surprisingly good Australian, boxed sherry, ensuring a sound snooze after a Sunday lunch, as likely as not, of roast Western District 'fat lamb'.

Prompted by Edward Elgar in Wells Cathedral, recollections of that village, situated on Emu Creek, home to platypuses and to eels of the edible variety, smoked in a tiny, local factory and enjoying to love and care for a parish church, its three out-churches and, above all, a vibrant, stimulating young family, flooded me with an intense and wistful joy.

Tom, Dick, Harriet and Joy

Pew-sitting is a mind-wandering, reflective, spiritually rewarding, life-enriching exercise that fills the heart with gratitude, which is the greatest and most irresistible of all impulses to worship. Of course there is boredom and exasperation as well. The sermon was far too long and prosaic, and the intercessions little more than a repeat radio newscast, but they encouraged the mind to set off on a creative wander. There is also, always, an invitation to wander physically, to leave the pew, walk to the altar and hold out a hand to receive the distillation of sacrificing-love in bread and wine, fondly shared with Tom, Dick, Harriet and Joy.

Pew-sitting provides time and space away from it all to think, reflect, nod off, chuckle, be flooded with grief, regret and sadness, but also with wonder, gratitude and a joy that raises the heart to the threshold of heaven.



St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells, A Quarry in the Sky

502) “This and That” - 18 June 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Henry VIII is an embarrassment. One of the nastiest of monarchs who's widely, though wrongly, considered to be the founder of the Church of England. This is a canard pithily proclaimed in a Gaelic quatrain, translated by Brendan Behan. It's expressive of what is now, happily, an outdated Roman Catholic and Irish contempt for the Church of England:

Don't speak of the alien minister,
Nor of his church without meaning or faith,
For the foundation-stone of his temple
Is the bollocks of Henry the Eighth.

Henry VIII didn't found the Church of England. From ignoble motives, yes, and with inexcusable brutality, indeed, he merely inaugurated and facilitated the redirection of our kingdom's Christian faith away from foreign control and interference to a course that was a degree or two closer to the Gospel.

Down with celibacy

Among the very best of changes wrought by the English Reformation was an end to enforced clerical celibacy. My sister, brother and self would not exist had this not been the case, for our mother was vicarage born, as were we. Every congregation that I've been associated with has been enriched by the presence of men and women born and brought up in a vicarage. Here in Wells, over coffee and a biscuit in the cathedral transept, as we begin to discover more about our fellow worshippers, a surprising number of them reveal gladly remembered vicarage childhoods. That their faith has survived the scrutiny provided by such intimacy from birth, is a testament to its fundamental attractiveness and loveliness, if not necessarily its truth.

There is not a vicarage or church house that I've lived in that I don't fondly remember. I've made a nostalgic return to them all, except to possibly the finest of them, on the island of St Helena. There is still time to do so. It has now moved up a peg or two in status to be the residence of the island's bishop.

Gardens of Eden

The two clerical homes most dear to me no longer exist. One has been replaced on the very same



Our Garden of Eden home in Wells

spot, on the island of Tristan da Cunha. We revisited, lived in and worked from it for three memorable weeks in 2012. The other was our first mission house in Rhodesia. This has disappeared without trace, but in 2010 I was able to stand where I thought to have been and was able to reacquaint myself with the view, feel and atmosphere of a wondrous place and time in my boyhood. These two vicarages are my personal narrative's Garden of Eden. The Scottish poet Alastair Reid (1926-2014) was also to the vicarage, or rather to the manse, born and distils perfectly what I mean.

Whithorn Manse

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 I knew it as Eden,
that lost walled garden,
past the green edge
of priory and village;
and, beyond it, the house,
withdrawn, white,
one window alight. | 3 Is it never dead, then,
that need of an Eden? |
| 2 Returning, I wonder,
idly, uneasily,
what eyes from inside
look out now, not in,
as once mine did,
and what might grant me,
a right of entry? | 4 Even this evening,
estranged by age,
I ogle that light
with a child's greed,
wistfully claiming
lost prerogatives
of homecoming. |



Most, though not quite all, of the vicarages, rectories or church houses I have lived in and loved have been sited in the bush, the countryside, or small villages and country towns. Only as a university student, based in my parents' rectory in Harare, did I experience a suburban rectory and later, as a curate, in a central city apartment, also in Harare. My last three rectories in Australia were sited in large, sleepy country towns with only pretensions to city status.

Domicile in the heart of a vibrant, pullulating city, for me, has been confined to two and a half years in London, as a supply teacher, in the early nineteen seventies, and much later, for a mere few months in Tooting, of all places, while on long leave from Australia. I loved both experiences, but it was Tooting that was a revelation. Diana's house there became our house when we married and we could well have retired to it because, to a wild, colonial boy like myself, used to lonely islands, the African bush, quiet Australian country towns and tranquil vicarages it was refreshingly energising. Tooting Broadway was our tube-station, it opened out onto a street jam-packed with voluble, colourful people

of every race, age and sort, all apparently living harmoniously, tolerant of each other and oblivious to differences of ethnicity and creed. Local shops, takeaways and restaurants catered for every national cuisine imaginable and although Diana and I rarely eat out, in Tooting we actually have a favourite restaurant, the modest, reasonably priced South Indian: *Dosa n Chutney*, 68 Tooting High Street. There, we invariably order an impressively presented, delicious masala dosa to eat with our fingers and unwind, among kindly, smiling, happy South Indian folk as well as other nationalities such as ourselves.

Tooting for Tooting

I was brought up and educated, from the age of eleven, in well ordered, uptight, racially segregated Rhodesia, complicitly and happily. Tooting is a wonderful example of the alternative



possibilities that were open to us in Rhodesia, but never adopted and so had to be imposed by violence which corrupted and ruined the changes for generations to come. Tooting is an example of what might have been, of how much more intriguing, creative and interesting is a polychromatic than a monochromatic society. It is a vibrant, noisy, colourful, fascinating, multi-racial, multi-ethnic pot pourri, where friendships, romances, liaisons and marriages bloom irrespective

of colour, religion or race. Nor is Tooting alone in this regard, there are similar districts all over London and the United Kingdom. There's more to celebrate than deplore about racism in Britain. Pick, dodge, and weave your way along Tooting Broadway to rejoice, be proud and possibly even agree with Trevor Phillips' arresting assertion that the UK is '*...the only country where a significant mixed-race population has come about through romance rather than rape*'

Stridency and polemic tend to be counter-productive and there is far too much of them on the subject of race. The most moving arguments come more subtly, as in this poignant little verse by the African American poet Countee Cullen (1903-46), a key figure in America's *Haarlem Renaissance*:

Incident

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.



Stogursey Castle - Somerset

(501) “This and That” - 11 June 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

There are few foods that can't be stomached. I confess to disliking the entrails of any mammal, reptile or fish, but this has more to do with squeamishness than with taste. Even crisp-fried whitebait give me pause for thought, though the taste and texture are divine.

Trieste to Mocambique

Many years ago, as a belated 21st birthday present, my parents invited me to fly from Rhodesia to the United Kingdom to join them for the last few weeks of their five yearly, three month stint of long leave. It involved a few weeks in England, then a trip by train to a village in the south of France, where an old friend of my father's lived and owned a vineyard. From there we caught a train to Trieste to board an Italian ship to take us to Beira, in Mocambique where members of the family would meet us and drive us back home to Harare. Because the Suez canal was closed at the time it meant a voyage all the way round Africa.

While in the south of France I enjoyed, for the very first time (believe it or not), the taste of garlic. It was a revelation. Why did a mere vegetable stew (my first *ratatouille*) have so distinctive and lingering a taste? It was the beginning of a lifelong love affair. Less impressive was the wine from our host's vineyard. All his grapes were sent to the local cooperative to be processed and the result was so extraordinarily *ordinaire* our host felt compelled to enhance it with blackcurrant syrup. On the one Sunday we spent there, I was surprised to hear the intermittent sound of shotguns all day and to be told that local *chasseurs* were out and about shooting for the pot tiny songbirds, such as larks and blackbirds. Stricter controls and prohibitions are in place these days, but the practice continues nonetheless, which brings me back to the subject of entrails.

A scent tent

The most treasured and notorious of all savoury French delicacies is the ortolan (*emberiza hortulana*), a tiny species of bunting. Because the little birds need fattening, if they are to be irresistible to sophisticated palates, they are not shot, but caught alive in traps. There's a poem by Rachel Galvin which contains the following description of what it is all about:

*Thumb-sized or tongue-sized. Kings used to catch them
at summer's end, knife-blind them so that in their darkness
they'd feast on millet all day, all night, a break from beetles and seeds,
until they grew from one ounce to four. Drowned
in Armagnac, plucked, placed in a saucepan, roasted,
you eat them whole, so the head dangles between your lips,
crunch bones like hazelnuts, underneath the linen napkin*

*you must place over your head to create a scent tent
or, so God won't see your shame.....*

Francois Mitterand ordered them to enjoy, for a very last time, the first bite's explosion of fat and hot entrail-juice, eight days before he died.

A favourite game bird in both France and Britain is the woodcock and most classic recipes are reverential to the bird's entrails. Nowadays the birds' innards are more usually cooked separately, to serve on toast with the bird, but the classic recipe informs us that *as the bird slowly rotates and begins to cook the intestines flow out and are captured on a piece of toast which is then served as a starter.....* Alexander Dumas, said of a recipe for a similar game bird, the snipe: *You must pay great attention to giving forks to the guests in the fear they would devour their fingers if they had touched the sauce.* There are indeed few foods that cannot be stomach.

Vile sausages

Vicars and spouses are often invited to feast with the faithful. This is vocationally appropriate because it entails dining with *high and low, rich and poor, one with another* and because Jesus of Nazareth himself was notably fond of feasts and banquets and accused of being a glutton and wine-bibber, for which I love him. Significantly too, the faith he bequeathed us was called into being, and is preeminently remembered, by way of a 'Last Supper'.

I was brought up to eat everything on my plate and can't remember every having been unable to do so at a dinner party, though once, on a return trip to Zimbabwe in 2013, there was a poignant meal in difficult and straitened circumstances, at which the sausages were so vile they made me gag. I was compelled to secrete them in my pocket to throw to the dogs a little later. They, perhaps, were made from entrails.

When parish priests eat out they're required to live up to their profession. One of my mother's little aphorisms acts as a warning: *Wine in. Wit out!* Jokes must not be too, too risqué, opinions not too too wildly heretical. It was good to be reminded by the novelist John Updike that a level of insecurity when out dining is not confined to the clergy:

Thoughts While Driving Home

Was I clever enough? Was I charming?

Did I make at least one good pun?

Was I disconcerting? Disarming?

Was I wise? Was I wan? Was I fun?

Did I answer that girl with white shoulders

Correctly, or should I have said

(Engagingly), "Kierkegaard smoulders,

But Eliot's ashes are dead?"

And did I, while being a smarty,

Yet some wry reserve slyly keep,

So they murmured, when I'd left the party,

"He's deep. He's deep. He's deep"?

Reversing a miracle

Clergy are sometimes asked to deliver a grace. My brother in law in Cape Town, a fine churchman, not a clergyman, sent me a grace he'd come across and stored for use at future regimental lunches and dinners:

Oh Lord in heaven so divine

Who first turned water into wine

Please forgive these foolish men

About to turn it back again. Amen

(500) “This and That” - 28 May 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade in Wells*

“Thou shalt not steal” is the eighth commandment. Most, if not all of us have broken it at some time or other. Diana and I did last Sunday. We visited our old vegetable garden at the Vicarage on Pilley Hill, now unloved, untended, overgrown with weeds and sad to behold, but containing several, healthy, ‘volunteer’ potato plants in full flower. They are relics of the love and care of yesteryear, *Arran Pilots* in one corner, *Charlottes* in another. We uprooted them to take home with us, as beautiful on the dark soil as eggs in a birds nest, a lovely clutch.

The wages of sin



Accomplished casuists, we evaded breaking the eighth commandment by redefining this theft as “scrumping” not stealing and by reflecting that it was we who had planted the parents, grandparents and great grandparents of these doughty survivors of neglect. Once back home in Wells we scraped off the thin outer skin of the smallest and middle-sized ones, the *Arran Pilots* white, the *Charlottes* yellow, boiled them for fourteen and three quarter minutes and made a whole meal of them, lightly sprinkled with salt and glistening with molten butter. The wages of sin: life, beauty and contentment.

It is good to be soft on sin, as was Jesus of Nazareth. Not quite all sin. Not overweening pride, cruelty, cold-heartedness and finger-pointing self-righteousness, but as for the rest, well, we are all members of the club. When I am offered absolution after a brief prayer of confession every morning in the Cathedral’s Lady Chapel, I accept it by crossing myself and saying “Amen”; not as a matter of course, out of mere habit, but because I know myself to have fallen short. Not so much by peccadillos like scrumping, but in loving and forgiving and so to be in need of forgiveness and absolution. I really do love Jesus of Nazareth for being mercifully soft on sin.

A haven of toleration

The reason I rarely listen to lengthy news bulletins, disdain politics and prefer Radio 3 to Radio 4 is because relentless, pharisaical, self-righteous finger-pointing and ‘outing’ of miscreants is unbearable. Any church community that is close to the heart of Jesus of Nazareth deals in forgiveness, not condemnation. The worst features of the Church in days long gone: the penitents stool, the stocks, the inquisition, the racking and the damning, appear to have migrated to the secular world. Every tall poppy has to be scythed, every noble action exposed as ignoble, every ignoble action shamed and punished. The good old C of E, (other than at its fanatical edges) is a haven of toleration, acceptance and love in a strident, intolerant world. Sermons soothe us to sweetly to sleep. News bulletins and commentaries awake us to anguish and angst

Pentecost

On Pentecost Sunday I celebrated the Eucharist for the first time since my retirement four months ago. It was in St Nicholas’ Chapel, Pilley, unadulterated Book of Common Prayer. Lovely.

Pentecost marks and celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit of God. It requires a poet not a preacher to distill sweet and elusive Spirit to mere words. How can a prosy sermon tame the wind, bottle the breeze, define, confine and limit, the free? How can a mere preacher juggle fire, turn what blazes, burns and flames into what is snuffable, containable and controllable; douse down fire into syntax, sentence, phrase and word; dim, dull and obfuscate the incandescent? How can a mere sermon tame wild, gusting, tempestuous Spirit into sense?

The Holy Spirit of God is wild: a wild west wind blowing, moving, subduing, ordering the waters of chaos. The Holy Spirit of God soothes: is the soothing, gentle breeze of meaning and purpose, is the warmer of hearts, infuser of the divine, is God's sweet breath animating the body of Christ, is God in our life and heart, the kiss of life.

It requires God himself to articulate Spirit in time and space, incarnate Spirit, enflesh, and make tangible the intangible, knowable the unknowable. To attempt to make sense of the holy fire and Spirit of God is to play God, is blasphemy, we live in the Spirit, we can't stand outside of it looking at it, defining it.

Glossolalia

Before heading for St Nicholas' Chapel last Sunday we listened to "Something Understood" on Radio 4 and heard a poem about 'speaking in tongues'. Both Diana and I loved it. A salutary experience for the likes of me, suspicious as I am of the phenomenon, but good poems, like this one, offer us a new perspective, get closer to the heart of the matter than can any sermon. It is wondrous verse composed by Kei Miller, a Jamaican poet, fiction writer, essayist and academic:

Speaking in Tongues

*This poem begins in 1987.
My grandmother dragged us to meet the Lord
under a tent in St Catherine. From here
I trace the heritage of standing spellbound
as women worship. Always I am on the outskirts.
I remember my grandmother unbecoming
the kind of woman who sets her table each Sunday,
who walks up from the river, water balanced easily
on her head. My grandmother became, instead,
all earthquake - tilt and twirl and spin,
her orchid-purple skirt blossoming.
She became grunt and rumble - sounds
you can only make when your shoes have fallen off
and you're on the ground
crying raba and yashundai, robosei and
bababababababba. Years later a friend tells me
tongues is nothing but gibberish - the deluded
pulling words out of dust. I want to ask him
what is language but a sound we christen?
I would invite him to a tent where women
are tearing their stockings, are on the ground
pulling up fresh words to offer as doves to Jehovah.
I would ask him if he sees no meaning here
and if he never had the urge to grunt
an entirely new sound. The poem, always,
would like to do this, always wants to break
from its lines and let a strange language rise up.
Each poem is waiting on its own Day of Pentecost
to thrash, to robosei and yashundai,
and the poem will not care that some walk past,
afraid of the words we try out on our tongues
hoping this finally is the language of God,
that he might hear it and respond.*

(499) “This and That” - 28 May 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



A traditional portmanteau

The portmanteau word “*workaholic*” was first used in a 1947 edition of the *Toronto Daily Star*: “If you are cursed with an unconquerable craving for work, call *Workaholics Synonymous* and a reformed worker will aid you back to happy idleness.”

A good innings

For many years I was a low-level workaholic of a parish priest, not a high-level one, that can lead to an early death which is a destiny now totally out of my reach. Should I die tomorrow it won’t be classed an early one, friends and family will wipe tears from their eyes, reach for a glass of wine and say philosophically: “*He had a good innings*”. I remember saying that to my mother in her mid seventies, to which she chortled a little ambivalently. The word “*chortle*” is a portmanteau word that combines *snort* and *chuckle*. My mother was an eloquent chuckler, chortler and snorter.

Lewis Carroll was the first to use the word “*portmanteau*” to describe a specific type of word rather than just a piece of luggage. He did so in reference to the poem “*Jabberwocky*” in his wondrous, timeless book, *Through the Looking-Glass*:

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Alice recites this first stanza of the poem to Humpty Dumpty hoping that he can explain to her the meaning of *slithy*. He replies, “Well, ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active.’ You see it’s like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.....”

The word *portmanteau* is itself a portmanteau word because it is formed from two French words, *porter*: to carry, and *manteau*: a mantle, cloak or coat. In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a portmanteau was a piece of luggage, usually made of leather, that opened into two equal parts. Some portmanteaus were large and some small, the latter are still with us as Gladstone bags. If I was an etiquette advisor I would counsel travellers to use the classy word ‘portmanteau’ instead of suitcase, and a ‘Gladstone bag’ in preference to a rucksack. Rucksacks, although hugely useful in freeing the hands to juggle boarding passes and passports, are as crudely proletarian as tattoos.

Early rising

Workaholic-ism came with my ordination. Before that notable change to my way of life I appear to have been content with doing only the minimum required to achieve success or applause. At school I rarely came first in anything. For examinations I swotted alright, but only frenetically at the very last minute being a thoroughgoing procrastinator. Throughout my schooling and for my degree and postgraduate qualifications, I always passed, but without notable distinction. It was when I was ordained as a deacon and posted to the Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints in Harare, that things began to change. I was required to be present at Matins each morning at 6.00am, to stay on for breakfast and then undertake my daily tasks. The bulk of these consisted of less than congenial religious education classes in the city’s many secondary schools, directed by the dean’s smiling but steely-eyed wife. There was also a fair swag of far more enjoyable hospital visiting.

The three year stint at the cathedral marked the beginning of an early rising habit that remains with me. Even in retirement I get up before half past five, to shave, shower, quaff a pint of coffee and listen to eighteenth century music as I type my journal, send off a daily poem to a group of kindred



The daily walk, emerging from the wood

spirits and then attend to these weekly columns. It's a routine, a groove, a rut that I love. As I write now my heart rejoices in a divertimento by Johann Michael Haydn, it is unutterably lovely.

Anxiety free

Early rising does not make a workaholic on its own. For that a degree of anxiety is required which came to me with the arrival of my family. Two sons in Zimbabwe, a daughter on St Helena and finally another daughter in Australia. Parish priests work from home and so unless they're hard-hearted, iron-disciplined, single-minded

and patriarchal swine, they get caught up gladly and willingly in domesticity. It was in Australia that diocesan politics and duties, on top of parochial obligations, began to threaten my effectiveness as a parish priest and parent enough to arouse a constant, nagging, low-level anxiety about work sloppily done, half done or undone and so damaging an all too arrogant pride in my effectiveness and success. It started to interfere with my sleep, causing me to get up earlier and earlier in order to accomplish the undone tasks that were keeping me awake, before the family were up and about. It worked. Anxiety was kept under control and I was able to hold my head high as an effective parish priest, but how busy, busy, busy life was in those years. When pastoral visiting I would sometimes nod off in mid conversation.

Once I arrived as a semi-retired, part-timer in Boldre, all anxiety lifted, though the working habits of a life time were not shed completely. Idleness eluded me, but not happiness. Now that I have fully retired it is apparent that happiness and idleness are incompatible. Anxiety-free I am happy indeed, but just because there remains so much to do.... and enjoy.

Love's austere and lonely offices

Two of my children, at different times, sent me a poem that must have resonated with them, recalling those busy, busy days in Australian rectories. Especially, I like to think, the last two lines. It is by the African American poet Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Winter Sundays

(or... early mornings in Australia)

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labour in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

(498) “This and That” - 21 May 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The first lesson at the Cathedral last Monday morning reminded me of a well-read, clever, whisky-loving old priest who was a much appreciated assistant to me in the last but one of my Australian parishes.

Nasty!

Lots of little candles adorned the Lady Chapel’s stone reredos to honour St Matthias’ day and the first reading was taken from the Acts of the Apostles. It began with the unpleasant details of Judas Iscariot’s death and then moved on to tell us of the election, by lot, of his successor Matthias, an election deemed necessary to bring the number of apostles back to the symbolically significant quota of twelve.

Unpleasant passages of scripture can be lightened by humour and the wise old Australian priest provided this for Judas’ death by omitting the passage’s middle sentences without otherwise interfering with text. His expurgated version went: “*Judas acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out..... and the lot fell on Matthias.*”



Abutilon vitifolium, 'Tennant's White'

Abutilon vitifolium

Towards the back of our small garden here in Wells is a cross between a tree and a shrub about 12 feet high with large green leaves. For the last two weeks it has been in glorious bloom and looks like continuing to be so for some weeks yet. Its flowers are large, delicate, intensely white and, like good Christians, die gracefully, unlike white camellia flowers which turn an unpleasant brown before they fully give up the ghost and fall to the ground. The tree or shrub is an *Abutilon vitifolium*, ‘Tennant’s White’: “..... a vigorous, upright, deciduous shrub with grey-felted stems bearing ovate, shallowly lobed, toothed, hairy, grey-green leaves and pendent, saucer-shaped, white flowers in early summer.”

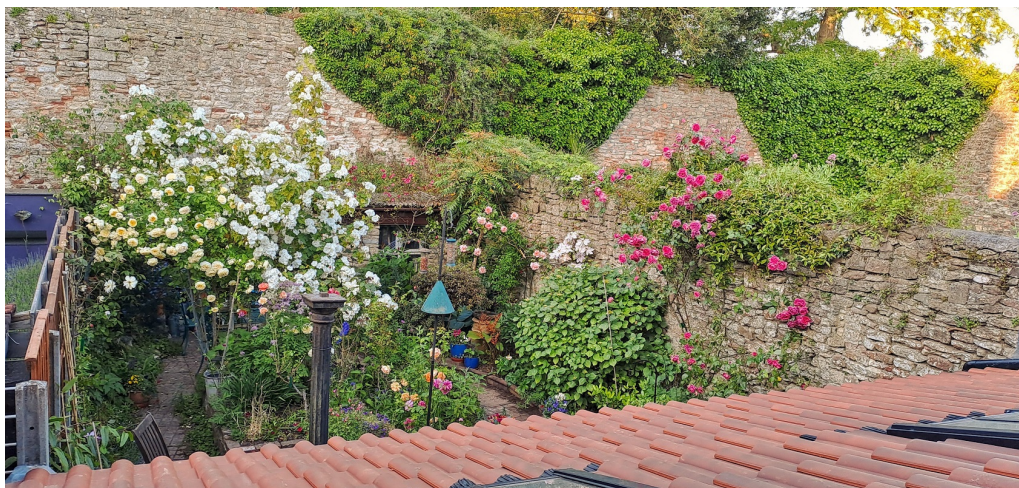
As the days begin to sun and warm up, we delight to eat our lunch beneath our *Tennant’s White*, grateful to be owners rather than mere tenants of our quirky little house and walled garden. We love it.

The previous owner of the house was a fondly remembered retired priest and dean of Wells Cathedral who must have loved and closely tended the tiny garden, for it is full of delights and surprises. We have counted twenty varieties of rose, many of which are coming into bloom. We felt little need to hold a “house blessing” ceremony on taking up residence in so pleasing a habitation and garden because the place was still warm with the old man’s loving and godly presence. At our first sighting, all his robes and pictures and furniture were still in place and so we were able to fall in love with him and the wife he so lovingly tended through old age to her death, as well as with their much loved residence. May they rest in peace.

Hugely different, equally lovely

The garden is very different from the one we have left, with many regrets, at Boldre. There we delighted in a whole acre’s worth of garden which we managed to control, but never fully tame, it contained large areas of lawn, its own stream, many great oak trees, a massive ash, a silver birch, sycamore, willow, hornbeam, a massive holly tree and several young beech trees, as well as innumerable

The Garden



laurels, camellias, hazels, rhododendrons and brambles. Best of all was a gnarled and ancient Bramley apple tree which dominated the front lawn with a gracefully balletic curve to its trunk and which yielded a prodigious annual crop of fine fruit, pressed upon all and sundry in the district by an insistent, persistent, indomitable Diana.

Here in Wells the garden is the width of the house, a mere 20 feet, with on one side a seven foot double wooden wall and on the other an ancient and substantial eleven foot high stone wall. The garden's length is about 36 feet and it is backed by another ancient stone wall as high as the garden is wide, 20 feet. It is a postage stamp sized Garden of Eden, an oasis in a maze of stone, a colourful gem set in limestone, over which the widely windowed and double glass-doored main kitchen and living area of the house looks out. No longer landscape artists we are now miniaturists.

Enriched by Boldre

There are links to the Boldre garden. We brought with us to Wells, over the many weeks before we finally moved, bags and bags of well matured Boldre Vicarage compost. Our bins beneath the laurels there had to be cleared and bagged to accommodate a new year's worth of autumn leaves and compostable material. Last week, after a thorough weeding, we emptied the last of the Boldre bags onto our little walled oasis. As we did so a bright eyed, thoroughly fearless robin joined us, to our delight, reminding us of W H Auden:

Their Lonely Betters

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
To all the noises that my garden made,
It seemed to me only proper that words
Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through
The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
And rustling flowers for some third party waited
To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

Not one of them was capable of lying,
There was not one which knew that it was dying
Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters
Who count some days and long for certain letters;
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep.

A garden in Wells has been enriched by Boldre compost, as have the city's society and church by our well matured and rotted down good selves, or so we fondly imagine.

(497) “This and That” - 14 May 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Well



Tristan da Cunha, the approach

In 1961 the volcano began to erupt on Tristan da Cunha, the loneliest inhabited island on earth. Its 350 denizens were evacuated safely to England. In 1963 all of them, bar a handful, elected to return.

Sentimental clap trap

Why leave the relative prosperity, security and sophistication of Britain to return to a small, windswept, lonely island with an uncertain future and where conditions, compared to those in England, were primitive, the volcano might erupt again and where a crayfish canning factory, essential to the islands only viable industry, had been totally destroyed?

Access to and from the island was difficult, infrequent and expensive; communication of any sort fraught and costly; radio, television and most forms of entertainment unsophisticated, primitive or non-existent and professional development and personal prosperity were all but impossible to aspire to or attain. Why did the good folk elect to return, once settled for several years, in England?

An interesting reason came from an old friend of my father's, now long dead, relayed to me by his son on our return to the island in 2012: “I wish to return,” he said, “because I can't hear the voice of God in England.” What crazy, theologically naive, sentimental clap trap that seems. The voice of God can be heard anywhere, and yet surely, to believers, there are indeed places and times in life where and when the voice of God is all but impossible to hear.

Demijohns of vinho verde

As I grew into my teenage years and went on to university I continued to love the Church, serve at the altar, sing in the parish choir, respect my father and admire his faith, but I came to doubt, though only privately, God's love and reality. I had grown too clever to believe in a deity. A shallow dabble in philosophy and the study of English literature allowed me to conclude that the world was too evil and heartless to accommodate a good and loving God. A more compelling shove in that direction had arrived with my release from the starvation of female company and romance inflicted by an all boys boarding school. I grew my hair long and began to slouch, slope and mooch my way into girl-crazy slobbishness. Still and always a churchgoer and indeed a lover of the Church, I stopped saying my prayers and could no longer hear God's voice because I was no longer listening.

I then fell in love with an exotic girl who didn't believe in God at all, but who was scintillating and beautiful. I was enraptured. We were both contracted to the Rhodesian government to teach for two years and, as often as possible, I would go to stay with her and her family for weekends, a hundred or so miles away on the border with Mocambique. We enjoyed crossing the border and driving to Vila de Manica through orange blossom scented orchards to swim, wine, dine and revel in the Latino way of life marinated and baked in hot African sun, smuggling back plaster of Paris capped demijohns of vinho verde. After those two years she left Africa to study Spanish dancing in Madrid, and I followed her, whereupon, to cut a long and sad story short, it all came to nothing once I moved on from Spain to London.

There, in 1971, during a bitterly cold winter, in the middle of a long postal strike and so unable to communicate with family or friends or to validate my professional qualifications, without a job and all my money spent in Spain, I eked out a miserable few months living in a cheap bedsitter, alone and

unloved. In my unhappiness I made contact with the local church, joined the local library and began to read some theology, but more importantly to say my prayers once more. One evening, in my tiny little bedsitter, with sleet-smattering wind rattling the window, I knelt beside the maroon covered bed to say my prayers. While thanking God I happened to use the words from the Communion Service: *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and Earth are full of thy glory....* as a mantra. It was as if the room filled with light, with bright, bright light and warmth, and remained so as I repeated the words again and again. I was conscious of God all around and within me.



Tristan's Volcano Commemoration

The music of what happens

The following morning God spoke to me in actual words, not directly, for rarely if ever are we addressed by the deity like that, more usually it is through the “music of what happens”. This time it was by way of the words of a man interviewed on the BBC who had been held captive for a long, long time by Tupamaros guerrillas in South America. When asked what it was that had kept him going and hopeful of release, he replied that, among other things, it was words from Psalm 139: *O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me : thou knowest my down-sitting and mine up-rising, thou understandest my thoughts long before. Thou art about my path, and about my bed and spiest out all my ways. For lo, there is not a word in my tongue, but thou, O Lord, knowest it altogether. Thou hast fashioned me behind and before and laid thine hand upon me....* As this man spoke it was as if God was speaking as well to me, in those words written thousands of years ago, spoken now by a man captured by guerrillas in the Argentine by courtesy of the BBC. It changed my life, marked the beginning of my turning into a priest. I heard the voice of God in England, that I had failed to hear in Africa. Unhappiness, the loss of a vibrant girlfriend, lack of money, no friends, no family, no job, opened my ears, turned me Godwards, to listen, to prayer. As with the old Tristan man exiled in England, whose unhappiness had brought him to realise a need to return to the quietude of a small, isolated community, where loving



Edinburgh of the Seven Seas from the lava of the 1961 volcano

one's neighbour was a matter of course and the music of what happens was to be heard in the souging of the wind in flax, the roar of great waves on rocks beneath the brooding sublimity of a dangerous mountain and in the ever changing, heart-stopping beauty of a wild, bountiful, awesome sea.

Going home

Not infrequently it is unhappiness and misfortune that open or reopen our ears to the divine, as C S Lewis remarked, they act as God's megaphone, calling us back to be who he wants us to be, to do what he wants us to do, to go where he wants us to go. He called me back to Africa from England to be a priest and he called an unhappy Tristan man back to Tristan from England to rebuild a remarkable community and lay his bones in the sodden earth of a wind-swept Garden of Eden in peace.

(496) “This and That” - 7 May 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Well



View from Troodos Mountains Cyprus

The best and most reliable mercenaries in the 15th and 16th centuries came from Switzerland, but were prone to a strange illness known as the *mal du Suisse*. This is a form of intense homesickness. Far from the lakes, mountains, edelweisses and cattle bells of home, a Swiss mercenary, at a serendipitous recall of his homeland, could be so overcome with nostalgia he'd begin to waste away with melancholy. Army doctors discovered that it was only a trip home to Switzerland that would ever cure him.

The word “nostalgia” originates in the Greek words *nostos* which means "returning home" and *algos* which means “pain” or “ache”. “Aching for home” then, “aching to return home”. I am a chronic nostalgic. The past relived, recalled and remembered in my imagination is more vivid, more lovely and more intense than ever it is while being actually experienced in the present. It's why I am in England and not in Australia, re-establishing English roots. It's why, over the past few years, I have revisited so many of my past home bases in England, South Africa, Tristan da Cunha, Zimbabwe and more recently Australia. They are places where I remember myself to have been exceedingly content and blessed.

Cow muck

One of the more bizarre, minor examples of this nostalgia has to do with the sense of smell. I recall with particular pleasure, when a little boy in country Staffordshire, the smell of old-fashioned, English farmyards, their pungent, warm scent of cow muck, hay and bedding straw. Out walking in Dorset's lovely Blackmore Vale some time ago, I caught a whiff of just that and it took me straight back to my happy childhood, flooding me with sharp, nasal nostalgia for the farmyards of a childhood fondly remembered. For the acrid, steamy, comforting homely aroma of cow muck, with all its pastoral associations: friendly cows that closely follow you as you walk across a paddock; leisurely ruminants chewing their cud; Thomas Gray's elegiac ruminations in a country church yard, where *the curfew tolls the knell of parting day* as nearby *the lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea*; the psalmist's “*cattle upon a thousand hills*” and, above all else, a cattle-scented, sainted manger in Bethlehem.

Don't, can't and won't let go

Throughout my childhood, youth and early manhood I never had to suffer the ministrations of a bad parish priest because my own father was one, a good one. Whenever my priest moved parishes, I moved with him. Those of the ever diminishing number of us who remain church-attending, Anglican Christians do so, in part at least, because of happy, homely, familial, parish church memories and associations. Thoroughly involved in mother Church, as a second, loving, spiritual home when young, we were secure, loved, loving, lovable and happy. God himself was real to us in both our parish church and our family life because God, above all else, as St John reminds us is love.

For me and many others, simply to enter a parish church and to sit down in a pew, is to be enfolded by peace, security, solace and love. It is love then, nostalgic love, that helps to hold us, bind us to church and God today and just because it is a very real and indeed intense love, we don't, can't and won't let it go.



Entrance Kykkos Monastery Cyprus

A dismal dissonance

There is a bitter-sweet element to nostalgia, though. What we long for, look back upon and remain loyal to is usually unattainable in exactly the form we remember and most treasure. There are not a few folk who, having abandoned the church, return to it at a moment of crisis, such as a bereavement, remembering it fondly as a source of solace, meaning and

love, but are unable to recognise it on their return. Exiled from happiness, by their grief, they sing, as did the ancient exiled Israelites:

*By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept
when we remembered thee O Zion....*

but on returning to Zion, they find it a strange, strange land: *how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* The Church they remember is no longer Zion, it is a Babylon of new liturgies, new hymns, new songs, fewer people, less activity, little buzz, no hum and with a stressed-out priest shared between half a dozen parish churches, or a thumb-twiddling “House for Duty” has-been like myself.

This is nostalgia’s problem. There’s a depressing, dismal dissonance between what we remember, look back upon and long for, and what is to be found, if and when we do return.

A deeper magic

Or is there? How real is that dissonance? When I think seriously about my own nostalgia for childhood, and my consequential revisits to the places in which that childhood was set, there’s more to the matter than just a delighted recognition of geography, location and place as being just as I remembered them, and of sights, sounds, scents and events echoed and relived much as they were experienced in the past. There is a rather deeper magic to it all.

As I remember, revisit and relive the past in creeping old age, I recognise and realise that what really animated and haloed it all then, once upon a time and above all else, was simply love, ordinary love, sweet familial and indeed divine love, and the security, solace, sweet sense and joy with which love invests everything it alights upon.

So too it is with parish church and life. A parish’s architectural beauty and setting, its liturgies, its buzz, hum and centrality to daily life are not of the essence, though important, lovely and loved by us all these things rightly were and are. Rather, they are sacraments or representations of something more important than themselves, namely, sacrificing, beautiful love, as represented, lived, taught and died by one Jesus of Nazareth, who dazzled us, taught us, showed us that the very hands that hold us in existence are pierced with unimaginable nails. It is sacrificing love that lies at the heart not only of authentic human living, but also in the very heart of the Divine, of the holy and blessed Trinity.

Hanging on in

It is this miraculous, sacrificing love that is a constant. Parish churches, liturgies, architectural beauty, choirs, organs, parsons and even our ways of articulating and understanding God, are subject to change and decay, can come, can go, but what they represent, what they are sacraments of, is eternal, rises again, even if and when it appears to die, as so many little country churches and parishes appear to be dying today.

So we church folk hang on in there! We remain undespairing, loving our parish church, loving our parish’s life, community and our precious childhood, blessed now, as then by life in a loving, forgiving and active, even if small, country-parish community.

(495) “This and That” - 30 April 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Zimbabwe, smoky Honde Valley

Anyone who was brought up in Africa, or who has lived there for many years, is likely to love it. I am filled with an aching nostalgia for the scent of wood-smoke cooking fires, the ringing call of the black collared barbet, the rattle of termite wings on window gauze, the scent of the blooming msasa trees and the sound of African drums accompanied by the rich harmony of African voices.

Beer from 44 gallon oil drums

I first visited the continent at the age of six, on my way to Tristan da Cunha, but only went to live there aged eleven, on a mission station surrounded by great, granite-bouldered kopjes and hills that teemed with baboons and wild pig and where an occasional leopard could be spotted in early evening headlights.

St Bernard’s Mission comprised a boarding school for African boys, a farm of about 2000 acres, a thatch-roofed, termite-ridden, beautiful church and a huge mission district consisting of 35 centres, each of them a school and a church, nearly all at the very end of the most appalling roads and tracks. Zimbabwe was then Southern Rhodesia, a part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

The Mission station was unusual for being surrounded by white farm land, but it wasn’t far from the vast tracts known then as Tribal Trust Lands, where the African people, already beginning to be overcrowded, managed to live a life of subsistence farming supplemented from income sent home by relatives working in the cities. Each weekend, overcrowded buses, roof racks piled high with suitcases, boxes, bicycles, live chickens in homemade coops and everything else imaginable, brought men back to party over beer concocted and cooked in 44 gallon drums, unappetizing grey in colour, sour to taste but delirium inducing in quantity. The drums at beer drink parties beat insistently most Friday and Saturday nights, a thrilling sound to go to sleep to as a child.

Tedium and delight in church

I loved the church, made of home-kilned bricks and thatched with local grass. Its deep, unkempt eaves were supported by spindly msasa poles, and its glassless windows looked out over besom-swept sand and incongruous Australian bottle brush trees, up and down the trunks of which scuttled large, blue-headed geckos. The Africans seemed naturals for worship. In those days, unlike us, they inhabited an un-demythologised world, peopled by ancestral spirits, witches, gods and God. There was no need for



Our mission church, St John's Chikwaka

pretence and posturing, God was simply part of the furniture of daily life and so worshippers could be natural with him. People would come into church right through the long services, some arriving only for the last hymn. If they were bored they unashamedly looked bored, if they rarely saw a white child, they would turn round and stare at him for the whole service. If they wanted to pick their nose, scratch their ear, or rub their eyes, they did so. They knelt without complaint, bare kneed on cement or on gleaming, polished, dried cow-dung floors. They were odoriferous, for there were no baths or showers in the villages. On a hot summer's day the acrid stench of packed humanity was enough to bring tears to your eyes and how I miss it.

The church services could be tedious to a lad like me, indeed, I've been bored witless for hours and hours and hours in church. It has helped to develop my imagination and is to be commended. Tediousness fled when the singing started though, the cow hide drums began their mysterious, relentless, muffled thudding and as the compelling rhythm and rich harmony began to shiver my timbers and excitement rose, the women would begin to shuffle away from their benches to do a little dance, ululating at the tops of their voices.

The African people of these parts were of the Mashona tribe, jovial, attractive folk who lived in small, round, thatched huts, Their tilled land, because they didn't have the means really to fertilise it, produced poor crops of maize for their staple food, pumpkins and kale for vegetables, and millet for beer. They kept scrawny cattle on common ground and chickens, little else and yet seemed always to be smiling.

The staple food was sadza, which is ground maize, boiled and eaten either as porridge or more usually as a thick dough, portions of which were pulled off in lumps, rolled and dipped into any relish there might be before being popped into the mouth.

The beginning of political trouble

All the while that we were on mission stations, the political situation in Southern Rhodesia became gradually more fraught. First the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland fell apart. Nyasaland broke away to become Malawi, Northern Rhodesia broke off to become Zambia and Southern Rhodesia, with a much larger white population, became simply Rhodesia and, on a very limited franchise restricted almost totally to whites, Ian Smith's conservative Rhodesian Front was elected to power.

During my last year at school, we left the mission station and my father became parish priest of a wealthy suburb in what was then Salisbury, so as to be able to afford seeing me through university. I was there in 1965 when Ian Smith declared his infamous unilateral declaration of independence from the United Kingdom. I spent four years at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, then taught for two years in Salisbury, after which I left the country for five and a half years, returning to be deaconed and priested in 1974. I then spent three years as a curate in Salisbury's Cathedral, and four and a half years in a country town 80 miles south west of Salisbury. During these years I lived through the worst of the civil war, leaving for the Island of St Helena only a year or so after it all finished and Rhodesia had become Zimbabwe under Bob Mugabe.

Post independence

An odd thing about the civil war was how good day to day relations appeared to be between black and white. I used to travel to distant parts of my parish in armed convoy for fear of ambush and we were killing each other with gusto and yet day to day relationships between whites and blacks remained friendly, though most blacks supported the freedom movement. It is doubtless patronising and racist to say this, but the Shona people, to me, seem pacific, kindly and amiable by nature, that our politics, attitudes and sense of superiority had driven them to violence went against their grain. How myopic we whites were.

The governments that came to nearly all of Africa with independence, proved to be as bad if not worse than the colonial regimes that preceded them. The reasons for this are many and varied, one of them being tribalism, obligations to family and tribe are binding and strong, too often coming before those to one's country or to the judiciary and so nepotism is all but endemic. National boundaries, drawn up by colonial powers paid little attention to tribal boundaries, creating all sorts of anomalies and problems.

Also, nationalist leaders and figureheads were educated at universities during the cold war in the fifties and sixties, infected by the extreme and fashionable revolutionary ideologies of the time. Revolution was deemed justifiable, but the brutality of revolution corrupts and poisons the ideals that the revolution stands for. Unlike Mandela, many leaders were brutalised by the struggle, bringing with them into power little regard for human rights and dignity, as well as half-baked, socialistic or communistic ideologies that they applied disastrously to the countries they inherited. African socialism, one party statism, and so on.

Piet me Vrou Cuckoos



Piet Me Vrou Cuckoo

Be that as it may, it is not politics or major events that imbue my love of Africa. It is to recollect the yeasty smell of the first summer rain on hot, hot earth. It's the spectacular summer thunderstorms. It's the rattle of large termite wings against wet evening fly screens and the smell of moths charcoaling themselves to death on the tilly lamps of the mission. It's the scent of wood-smoke filtering through hut thatch in the early morning. It's the insistent summer calling of the Piet me Vrou Cuckoo, and the plaintive song of the Black Capped Bush Shrike. It's the wide eyed beauty of shiny little black African babies. It's the orange and pale-grey lichened, great granite boulders and kopjes. It's the spindly trunked msasa trees, miraculously coming into bright, soft, new leaf after six months with no rain. It's termite mounds and baby chameleons. It's the unexpected sight of a delicate duiker or bush buck on the road. It's

early morning chilled paw paw, fresh guava juice and a profusion of avocado pears. It's cheerfulness and laughter in the face of deprivation, it's simplicity of life and basic values. It's the rich harmony of the singing in churches and stirring drum beats. It's the orangey-yellow, tall elephant grass alongside dusty, rutted roads and the fruit of the mahobohobo tree. It's the flaming flamboyant trees, the sweet smelling bauhinia and syringa trees. It's little round-thatched-hutted villages, scattered throughout tribal areas, perfectly at one with their environment.

There's something elemental about Africa, its despair tests the mettle of hope, revealing most of our hopes to be shallow. Poverty likewise tests the mettle of our abundance and finds it wanting. The continent challenges our values and priorities, points us to some of the elemental truths of Jesus of Nazareth's Sermon on the Mount, reminds us that if there is ever to be resurrection in our lives, there has first to be death to so much of what we cling to.



Traditional Village at Great Zimbabwe



Harare Cathedral

(494) “This and That” - 23 April 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade in Wells*

The life of a priest began for me in 1974 in the cathedral of a vibrant city. Now that we are settling into the city of Wells, it is likely to end in a cathedral city too. A circle satisfactorily completed: “In my end is my beginning.”

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

(T S Eliot: Little Gidding)

St Mary and All Saints, Zimbabwe

It all began in the Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints, strategically sited in the very heart of Zimbabwe’s colourful capital city Harare. The building’s great west doors look out on to *Unity Square*, in those days known as *Cecil Square*, notable for venerable Jacaranda trees, an impressive fountain, voluble flower sellers and shade-seeking shoppers and tourists. There too, under the jacaranda trees during rag week in 1965, the long-haired scalp of a university student called Andrew Neaum was sheep-shear shorn, against his will, by agricultural college students.

The Cathedral was designed by Sir Herbert Baker, an English architect who, for two decades, was a dominant figure in Southern African architecture. He designed the cathedrals of Cape Town and Johannesburg and also Pretoria’s Union Buildings and Cape Town’s Grootte Schuur. The construction of Harare Cathedral, in mellow sandstone, began in 1913 and its first phase, the building’s east-end apse and chancel, were completed in 1914. The rest of the building, of less attractive composite stone, was completed in 1961 and features an imposing tower with 10 bells (as here in Wells) and inside, towards the back of the nave’s central aisle, there is a remarkable and lovely, total-immersion font. I began my diaconal and priestly life there in December 1974 and left to take on my own first parish, All Saints, Gatooma, in November 1977.

A attractively dilly monk

They were heady, halcyon days. On taking up the Cathedral appointment and soon to be married, I was allowed to scout central Salisbury (Harare) for suitable accommodation. I settled upon *5 Hadlow Place* in the central city’s leafy avenues, a substantial, second floor flat, where Margaret, my first wife and the mother of my children, now in God’s good hands (may she rest in peace) and I, were quietly content. At dusk, on summer evenings, we’d stroll around the heavily jasmine-scented, nearby city park to sit alongside lily-padded ponds as frogs croaked and boomed their lusty desire from ballooning throats and bats flicked, swerved and swooped between the trees. Every morning, except on Tuesdays, my day off, I arrived at the Cathedral for a 6.00am recitation of Matins with priestly colleagues in St George’s Chapel. This was followed directly by a celebration of the Eucharist in the Lady Chapel, for which we were joined by an eclectic collection of idiosyncratic, quirkily pious and altogether intriguing folk who afterwards joined us for a toast, marmalade and coffee breakfast. I shared an office with an ancient priest called Lionel Gubbins, remarkable for sermons never longer than three minutes.

We were encouraged to make our private devotions up a narrow, winding stone staircase in the organ loft and by far the most pious of my colleagues was Fr James Woodrow, an Anglican monk of the Community of the Resurrection, which is based in Mirfield, Yorkshire. The Community ran a fine secondary school and influential mission centre in the mountainous, eastern region of Zimbabwe where Fr James, a teacher of mathematics, had been hit over the head with a rock which accentuated his piety, exaggerated his quirks and turned him slightly, though not at all unattractively dilly. I loved him. Nearly every book in the cathedral’s library had pencilled inside its cover *in usum JW*. He always wore a cassock and scapular, the latter being a sort of huge front and back bib to keep cassocks clean and he appeared to say all seven of the monkish daily offices, leaving half eaten snacks behind him as he rushed

off at the last minute to mutter his prayers at the designated hour. I used to joke that we were likely to find half finished boiled eggs on window ledges and prayer desks with *in usum JW* pencilled on their shells.

Andrew meets Andrew



Cathedral of St Mary & All Saints - Harare

One of the loveliest things about retiring to central Wells is to be back strolling the cloisters, chapels and mysterious corners of a great cathedral and attending daily Eucharists and choral Evensongs. Here, as all those year's ago in Harare, the Eucharists take place in an east-end lady chapel, with anything from eight to twenty of us present. It is an exquisite space and so resonant that I can't distinguish what the intercessions are about, freeing me to compose my own, with a heavy bias towards family and friends. The rest of the service I know off by heart and don't need

to hear what is said. At daily choral Evensongs, seated in the ancient choir stalls, I can gaze at a great, golden haloed icon of St Andrew beside the altar, the Cathedral is dedicated to him and I imagine him relishing the challenge to sanctify, bit by reluctant bit, a sinful, newcomer namesake from Boldre and beyond.

The music at Harare Cathedral was very good, with a fine, though non-professional choir. The Precentor was yet another eccentric priest called Alex Liddle, theologically educated at Codrington College in the West Indies, of all places, with an inevitable predilection for genuine rum. The adult choir despised him for being a musical dilettante, the choirboys, mostly of mixed race, loved him. He introduced Margaret and me to the colourful parties and exotic spice-loving palates of the choirboys' parents. He sailed close to the wind and once temporarily fled the country after being accused of stealing an Italian Contessa's valuable ring. He returned to face the music though and mitigating circumstances ameliorated the consequences of his actions. What fun he was. Eventually he fell out with a new and equally outrageous dean, and became a successful parish priest instead, but there were psychological problems that led to his eventual suicide. May he too rest in peace. The Cathedral here in Wells has had colourful episodes, outlandish characters and scandals too, but as with Harare, they're mere froth. Both beneath and above it all is the sublime and the divine. Deo gratias.

A homecoming

The opening chorus of Johann Sebastian Bach's Magnificat in D is a paean of joy. The orchestra includes the shimmering valveless trumpets of the era and thumping timpani. From the very opening chord Mary's joy is shared and showered upon us. The work concludes with the *Gloria Patri*, at the very end of which, when the words "as it was in the beginning....." arrive, there's a frisson of recognition because they're set to music that is a repetition of the glorious opening chorus. It is literally "as it was in the beginning". A circle satisfactorily completed: "In my end is my beginning." I too have come home. The Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints, Harare, the Cathedral of St Andrew Wells:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

(493) “This and That” - 16 April 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



The ancient Wells City gaol, now a pub

There are some interesting and ancient pubs dotted about the city of Wells. They have been forbidden territory to me during Lent, but now my annual, self-imposed, Lenten alcohol drought is broken, I'm free to balance twice daily cathedral visits with twice daily pub visits. Unlikely! The price for a pint in a pub is too high, though it does occur to me that if we contributed the same sum each month to an ancient pub as we do to the city's ancient Cathedral, I could be as alcohol tickled and pickled daily as I am God tickled and pickled each day.

Rechabites and wowers

To view the world from the perspective of wowers and Rechabites for six lenten weeks is worthwhile. One of the most gratifying compliments I ever received from my brother was at a festive family gathering many years ago. At the conclusion of one of my hyped-up, conversational rolls he said to me: “Wow, Andrew, and you're not even pissed!” If the company's good you don't need alcohol to dazzle. His company is good.

The Rechabites were an Old Testament clan descended from a fellow called Rechab, whose son Jehonadab commanded their descendants never to live in cities or to drink alcohol, so they didn't. Many Muslims claim Rechab as an ancestor, which figures, for they too are forbidden to drink alcohol. In 1835 Christian members of the British Temperance Movement formed a Friendly Society called the “Independent Order of Rechabites”. Their purpose was to promote total abstinence from alcohol everywhere and because they were well connected and financed the Order flourished and still exists.

The word ‘wowser’ originates in Australia and refers to kill-joys, to those who derive satisfaction from depriving others of their pleasures, especially booze. “A wowser” says the Australian poet C J Dennis, “*is an ineffably pious person who mistakes this world for a prison and himself for a warder.*” The Independent Order of Rechabites were wowers, as too are all temperance movement members, often from the very best of motives. Their most astonishing achievement in Australia occurred during the First World War. They succeeded in securing the imposition of a 6.00pm closure of all pubs, a restriction that lasted until the mid nineteen sixties.

As with Prohibition in America, it didn't really work. It drove drinking underground and over-ground gave rise to the notorious “*Six o Clock Swill*”, a mad, last-minute rush after work every evening to buy, line up and down as many drinks as possible before hotel bars closed.

St John's account of Jesus turning gallons and gallons of water into wine, is enough to make a Rechabite weep and a wowser howl. Australian winemakers, among whom I lived, moved and had my being for many, many years, like Jesus, are miracle workers. They produce gallons and gallons of wine from little or no water in that arid land. Wonderful. It's enough to make a Rechabite weep and a wowser howl.



Wells Market Place and pub

Larrikins

There is another Australian word linked to the word wowsers: *larrikin*. Originally it was an insult meaning *lout, hoodlum or hooligan*, but has been inverted to mean pretty well the opposite. Such inversions are a characteristic of Australians. Anyone with red hair is nicknamed “bluey”, the word “bastard” is a term of affection and the word “bloody” is anodyne as “daft” or “silly”. So

too larrikin, which is now proudly adopted as a positive attribute of the Australian character. A larrikin being a bloke who refuses to kow tow to authority or to stand on ceremony. He's an attractive scallywag.

In what is called the *larrikin-wowsers nexus*, larrikinism feeds on and encourages wowsers and vice versa. The larrikin's irreverent disdain for propriety, authority, convention and for po-faced middle class values, only goes to reinforce those very qualities in wowsers, encouraging them to wield a yet firmer hand to uphold and preserve them: *the larrikin-wowsers nexus*.

Ocker

Another not totally unrelated Australian term is *ocker*. This also, while ostensibly insulting or deprecating, shows hints of being inverted almost into a compliment. A person considered ocker would be typically depicted in a blue singlet, with a tinnie in hand and rubber thongs on his feet, in possession of a beer gut and a strong strine whine. Yet Richard Neville defines the term as being all “*about conviviality: comradeship with a touch of good-hearted sexism*” That coarse Australian denizen of Earls Court, Barry Mackenzie, like Dame Edna Everage, a Barry Humphries creation, is an ocker of ockers.

In days gone by I liked to puzzle and even annoy my fellow Australians by claiming Barry Mackenzie as the evangelist who first attracted me to Australia. As a young Rhodesian supply teacher in 1970s London, I was an avid reader of *Private Eye* and there, in Barry Humphries' outrageous comic strip, discovered and delighted in the exploits of the ocker of ocker, larrikin of larrikins Barry Mackenzie. He was ocker, gauche, coarse and foul-mouthed indeed, but also with just a hint of attractive larrikinism. His persistent, but always unsuccessful, pursuit of Sheilas, while comical and entertaining, also possessed faint, almost absent, not quite invisible, totally unexpected elements of innocence and pathos.

A few years ago, as we waited in Perth to board a plane for Darwin, Diana and I watched a gradual early morning build up of young Australians in overalls and great workmen's boots. They were waiting for flights to maintain mines and outstations. Whether it was our imaginations that invested them with an attractive, laid-back larrikinism, or the authentic thing I am not sure, but there was something strong, appealing, reassuring and attractive about them. It was good to be back among such folk.

The antipodean Jesus

All of which sets me wondering about the Jesus I look up to, admire and love. It's the gallons and gallons of wine Jesus, it's the glutton and wine bibber accused Jesus, it's the whip of cords and overturn of tables Jesus,

it's the mingling with tax-collectors, sinners and whores Jesus, it's the insulter of pharisees Jesus, it's the courageous, refusing to run away Jesus, it's the yarn spinning, cryptic, radical Jesus, it's the subversive, questioning of authority Jesus. Perhaps then even it's the larrikin Jesus, the Australian Jesus. Good on him.

(492) “This and That” - 9 April 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Early spring Bishop's Palace Gardens

In Cape Town I have a brother in law, Bob Bedingham, full of fun, wit and racy repartee, he once told me of introducing his wife, my sister Sue, to the culinary delight of whelks. She was not hugely impressed, and then utterly and forever un-whelked the next morning on observing an uncooked, leftover whelk half way up the kitchen wall trailing slime. It appeared as reluctant to be eaten as she ever to eat them again.

I myself sampled jellied eel and whelks for the first time 23 years ago in Clacton on Sea. Last week we returned there, not for whelks and eels on the pier, but to visit and reminisce with the best of

old friends from my University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland days, Tony and Alison Spooner. Alison recalled a particularly memorable visit we'd made together in 1971 to Old Highgate Cemetery. It was touted in those days as the spookiest place in London.

Grief melts away like snow in May

It was in a graveyard that a tearful Mary Magdalene heard a gardener address her gently as “Mary”. Her tears of sadness turned to tears of gladness, upside down, to downside up.

In that same graveyard, the disciple closest to and most beloved of Jesus, panting from a fast sprint to get there, glanced into an empty tomb, stepped back and scratched his head. A penny dropped. Hope exploded. Of course, of course the tomb's empty. If love is love and God is love, it has to be, can be no other. He's vindicated, risen.

On the road out of town, two plodding, disillusioned disciples picked up a light-footed, light-hearted and talkative hitch hiker. Later, while enjoying a pub meal together, his insight and eloquence entranced and enlightened them. Again a penny dropped. “Grief melts away like snow in May”.

Beside the Sea of Galilee seven weary, unsuccessful, disconsolate, fishless fishermen were gifted, at the very last moment, a bursting net full of large fish. There followed a celebratory, alfresco, beach-breakfast with their friend of friends. Elsewhere, in the intimacy of an upper room, doubting Thomas was turned into doubtless Thomas.

Silent light splintered

These beautiful, beautiful, accounts of an ineffable event, attempt to convey good news that is too mysterious fully to comprehend, too beautiful fully to bear. It requires a poet, paradoxically in prose, to help us understand:

One day in late autumn I happened upon a clump of bare trees. I walked so quietly, my approach was unnoticed. I stepped inside.... it was alive with goldcrests. The air purred with their small wings. To look up was to see the twigs re-leafed with their small bodies. Everywhere their needle-sharp cries stitched at the silence. Was I invisible? Their seed-bright eyes regarded me from three feet off. Had I put forth an arm, they might have perched on it. I became a tree, part of that bare spinney where silently the light was splintered, and for a timeless moment the birds thronged me, filigreeing me with shadow, moving to an immemorial rhythm on their way south.

Then! Suddenly! They were gone, leaving other realities to return: the rustle of the making tide, the tick of the moisture, the blinking of the pool's eye as the air flicked it, and lastly myself. Where had I been? Who was I? What did it all mean? When it was happening, I was not. Now that the birds had gone, here I was once again.

In Royden Wood

Those of us with the gift of faith, are privileged with intimations, glimpses, flashes of a reality other than, and beyond material and physical reality. It's as if a curtain is momentarily drawn to reveal a brighter reality that stops the heart, discombobulates, turns us round about and upside down. Until the curtain falls back again, and everyday reality returns, leaving us asking, like the poet R S Thomas, where have I been, who was I?

It can happen in Royden Wood among the beech trees, as the sun filters down upon recently unfolded leaves that are soft, membrane-thin and translucent, transfigured into so vivid and livid a green we're taken out of ourselves, transported beyond and away from material reality, discombobulated with delight. Light waves resonate wonderfully into sound waves allowing God's voice to be heard as once to Moses from a flaming desert bush.

The silt of a thousand years of alleluias

It can happen in ancient churches, like St John's Boldre or St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells. Where, in the crevices of the oldest stones, linger residues, resonances, memories; rests the silt of a thousand year's worth of alleluias, amens, and *Gloria in Excelsis Deo's*. They reinforce and add such a weight of glory and significance to our own little offerings of prayer and praise that we know, know, know, that God is, that God loves, that God calls us to change, to make amends. After which, when everyday reality returns, we are left asking, like R S Thomas, "where have I been, who was I? When it was happening, I was not. Now that the moment's gone, here I am once again."



Bishop's Palace Gardens - early spring primroses

An irruption of sunshine

Good Friday's Crucifixion was one reality, material reality, every day reality. Sometimes so, so lovely, too often, as on that dreadful Friday, puzzling, brutal, vile, horrifying.

Easter Day's Resurrection is different. Everyday reality's curtain is pulled back to allow another reality, spiritual reality, heaven itself, to irrupt like sunshine into material reality to

challenge and change it forever. The resurrection narratives bear witness to that reality. They are different, entrancing, intriguing, mysterious, numinous, as you would expect. They're heart-stoppingly beautiful, as you would expect.

Alleluia

At Easter we're dealing with the beyond, are celebrating being visited by the beyond, timelessness has visited time; spacelessness space; nowhere, where; no sense, sense; spirit, matter; heaven, earth; life, death. Easter day! Easter Day! Christ risen. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

(491) “This and That” - 2 April 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Distant view of Wells Cathedral

My son in Australia sent me last week an anonymous twitter tweet he'd stumbled upon: “*I am a vicar in the CofE. I use Chat GPT to write my sermons and - according to multiple parishioners - I'm preaching brilliantly every week. I'd feel guilty but the stipend is piss poor this frees up many hours per week to actually do proper pastoral work. F*** it.*” Vicars aren't necessarily behind-the-times Luddites, prudes, or even pastorally minded, it seems.

Out of curiosity I gave Chat-GPT a sermon test myself. I asked for 600 words on the Blessed and Holy Trinity. In seconds it delivered a sermonette that was commendably orthodox, but also dull and dreary, possibly with intelligent intent, because “to sermonise”, by definition, is to be dull. If so, how predictable, how doubly dully dull.

Drop dead sermons

At about 4.00am last Monday morning Diana and I were both awake when we would have preferred to be asleep. So we applied a remedy that rarely fails. I took up my Kindle, as a soporific, to read us back to sleep. No chance. The book I'm reading at present is a sizzler. It amused, fascinated and inspired us into full and admiring wakefulness. At 5.00am I discarded the Kindle and got up for my shower, leaving Diana to apply our second remedy for sleeplessness, she turned on Radio 4 and was snoring in seconds.

The sizzler of a book was recommended to me by my daughter in Tasmania. It's called *Super-Infinite: The Transformations of John Donne* by Katherine Rundell. Its introduction begins with an account of his preaching. No chatbot will ever, ever be able to emulate or come close to John Donne (1571-1631), as preacher:

“The power of John Donne's words nearly killed a man. It was the late spring of 1623, on the morning of Ascension Day, and Donne had finally secured for himself celebrity, fortune and a captive audience. He had been appointed the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral two years before: he was fifty-one, slim and amply bearded, and his preaching was famous across the whole of London. His congregation – merchants, aristocrats, actors in elaborate ruffs, the whole sweep of the city – came to his sermons carrying paper and ink, wrote down his finest passages and took them home to dissect and relish, pontificate and argue over. He often wept in the pulpit, in joy and in sorrow, and his audience would weep with him. His words, they said, could 'charm the soul'. That morning he

was not preaching in his own church, but fifteen minutes' easy walk across London at Lincoln's Inn, where a new chapel was being consecrated. Word went out: wherever he was, people came flocking, often in their thousands, to hear him speak. That morning, too many people flocked. 'There was a great concourse of noblemen and gentlemen', and in among 'the extreme press and thronging', as they pushed closer to hear his words, men in the crowd were shoved to the ground and trampled. 'Two or three were endangered, and taken up dead for the time.' There's no record of Donne halting his sermon; so it's likely that he kept going in his rich, authoritative voice as the bruised men were carried off and out of sight."

Lavishly sexed poetry

Nor will any chatbot ever come near to rivalling Donne the poet. He wrote *"some of the most celebratory and most lavishly sexed poetry ever written in English, shared among an intimate and loyal group of hyper-educated friends"*:

License my roving hands, and let them go
Behind, before, above, between, below!
O my America! My new-found land!
My kingdom, safest when with one man manned!

Murderous schoolmasters

As yet we are only about to begin chapter three, still dazzled by the first two, so well written and fascinatingly informative. For example,

"because smoking was believed to keep the plague at bay, at Eton they were flogged for the crime of not smoking. Discipline could be murderous. It became necessary to enforce startling legal limits: 'when a schoolmaster, in correcting his scholar, happens to occasion his death, if in such correction he is so barbarous as to exceed all bounds of moderation, he is at least guilty of manslaughter; and if he makes use of an instrument improper for correction, as an iron bar or sword ... he is guilty of murder.....'" Donne was educated at home.

Deserves to be hanged

Donne is intriguing and fascinating, but also difficult. It is easy to sympathise with Dr Johnson (1709-1784), who thought Donne, "deserved hanging" for "not keeping accent" and considered his verse improper, ugly, broken, and deliberately deviant from norms in striving after newfangledness. But, says Katherine Rundell, *"Donne did not want to sound like other poets. Human experience exceeds our capacity to either explain or express it: Donne knew it, and so he invented new words and new forms to try....."*

He's a bracing challenge to folk like me who are too easily satisfied by verse and music that is polished, ordered, regular, intelligible and melodious. A fair proportion of the music sung in the Cathedral here in Wells is dissonant enough to challenge me to widen my horizons and to put more effort into listening.

A Zimbabwean childhood

Kate Rundell, the book's author, is in her thirties, a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford and a successful author of children's books. From the age of four until fourteen she lived where I was brought up and educated, Zimbabwe. There she recalls, *"school ended every day at one o'clock. I didn't wear shoes, and there was none of the teenage culture that exists in Europe. My friends and I were still climbing trees and having swimming competitions..."*. Her *"pitch perfect recall of her childhood"* could well be, she supposes because *"growing up in Zimbabwe was so sunlit"*. Her hobbies include tightrope walking and roof walking, and each day begins with a cartwheel because *"reading is almost exactly the same as cartwheeling: it turns the world upside down and leaves you breathless"*.

(490) “This and That” - 26 March 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade in Wells*



St Cuthbert's Church, Wells

We met briefly a doughty dame with close ties to St Helena last week, merry, good fun and diminutive, tiny. So much so that when she said, on parting, “can I knock on your door for a chat about the island sometime, I wanted to respond: “There’s no need for you to knock, you can pop in through the keyhole.”

I didn’t, but that the thought even entered my mind indicates, perhaps, an insensitivity to people’s feelings. I like to think not, and that it’s evidence merely of having a good eye for incongruity of the sort that lies behind a robust sense of humour. Hmm.

A diminutive Professor

Another diminutive person came my way last week, introduced by a limerick. It was Oliver Wendell Holmes Snr, (1809-1894), a polymath lawyer, doctor, Harvard professor, journalist, poet, novelist, biographer, inventor, essayist and more. He was only “*five feet three inches when standing in a pair of substantial boots*”. The limerick that caught my eye was remarkable for making a theological point. Limericks more usually grub around in sewers and brothels.

God's Plan

God's plan made a hopeful beginning.
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We trust that the story
Will end in God's glory,
But at present the other side's winning.

Tinsel erudition

Although an accomplished versifier, Wendell Holmes made his greatest mark as a forward thinking and innovative practitioner and teacher of medicine. Critical of traditional medical practices, he once quipped that if all contemporary medicine was tossed into the sea “*it would be all the better for mankind—and all the worse for the fishes*”. In a series of lectures he exposed the poor reasoning and manipulated evidence that lie behind some of the popular quackeries inflicted upon humankind. He describes one of them that is still widespread today as a “*pretended science..... a mingled mass of perverse ingenuity, of tinsel erudition, of imbecile credulity, and of artful misrepresentation, too often mingled in practice*” He had a good way with language.

He bequeathed to us all a new English word. In 1846 he wrote to the dentist William T. G. Morton, the first medical practitioner to demonstrate publically the use of ether during surgery: “*Everybody wants to have a hand in a great discovery. All I will do is to give a hint or two as to names—or the name—to be applied to the state produced and the agent. The state should, I think, be called ‘Anaesthesia.’ This signifies insensibility—more particularly ... to objects of touch.*” He predicted that his new term “*will be repeated by the tongues of every civilized race of mankind*”.

The softest of soft porn

Paintings of lovely or striking views as if seen through and framed by windows are particularly pleasing. The view’s beauty or significance is demarcated and concentrated, not so much by the painting’s frame, as by the window’s frame. Keyholes provide artists with much the same opportunities, but in an even more concentrated fashion, plus intriguing possibilities associated with humankind’s dubious propensity to keyhole peep.

The Austrian artist Hans Zatzka 1859-1945 painted a series of semi-nude female figures framed by a keyhole, the softest of soft porn. There’s science behind this though. On a recent visit to an ophthalmologist I was asked to look, with one eye, through an eye-sized hole in a sort of black mask



Eventide base metal ingot

called an occluder. To do so didn't help my eye see any better at all, but then I was instructed to bring a shutter down over the hole and peer through the tiniest of holes that punctured it, whereupon my eye could see with much improved clarity. This phenomenon is called "*pinhole acuity*". Apparently if a person's vision improves by use of the pinhole, it is likely the front part of the eye that is causing the blurred image (the cornea or the lens). If vision is not improved, it is likely to be the back of the eye (the vitreous or the retina) that is affected.

Through a keyhole brightly



Early morning gold ingot

It has been a fairly grey end to winter. After attending weekday cathedral choral evensongs we emerge lit up. The weather that greets us has usually been anything but, except on one or two remarkable occasions. We exit at about ten to six, by way of a small and ancient wooden door in the west end, hoping not to be baptized by jackdaw or pigeon dung. At that time, in late winter and early spring, before the clocks are moved forward, if the sun is shining it anoints all that it alights upon with a gentle, lambent, lucent loveliness. As we approach the stone arches to leave the Close lawn and look back at the cathedral's great western front, full face to the setting sun, it's transfigured. It gleams a golden glory. Once we've passed through the arch and again look back, framed this time by the shaded stone keyhole of the arch, the Cathedral's sun-granted glory is concentrated and intensified into a gold ingot of loveliness, worthy of the New Jerusalem. It speaks of God as surely as did the burning bush to Moses in the wilderness.

(489) “This and That” - 19 March 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Cathedral vista

The word prig, snappily singly syllabic, is less common than it used to be, though prigs still abound. In the 13th century the word referred to a small nail used in roofing or tiling. In the 16th century it described a tinker and also a thief, and in the 17th a dandy, a coxcomb and a fop. In the 20th century, Fowler, in his “Modern English Usage” quotes an anonymous source to inform us that a prig

....is wise beyond his years in all the things that do not matter. He cracks nuts with a steam hammer: that is, calls in the first principles of morality to decide whether he may, or must, do something of as little importance as drinking a glass of beer. On the whole, one may, perhaps, say that all his different characteristics come from the combination, in varying proportions, of three things—the desire to do his duty, the belief that he knows better than other people, and blindness to the difference in value between different things.

Priggish Bullfinches

As a lad I was a bit of a prig. I recall asking my mother if I should omit any swear words that occurred in whatever I happened to be reading. This is not as impossible as it sounds. When we read, our eyes race ahead of our mental absorption of what we are reading, allowing us to be faintly aware of any looming swear words and so, priggishly, to evade their full absorption.

In 1807 a prig called Harriet Bowdler edited *The Family Shakespeare* omitting anything remotely salacious. Her equally priggish brother, Thomas, applied the same treatment to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*. Their efforts bequeathed the English language the splendid verb “bowdlerize”, meaning, to remove from a literary work any words or expressions deemed offensive. In *The Family Shakespeare* Ophelia’s death is an accidental drowning, not suicide. The exclamation “God!” is replaced with “Heavens!” In Henry IV part II, the prostitute Doll Tearsheet is cancelled, she is left out entirely. The Bowdlers are sometimes accused of changing Lady Macbeth’s “Out damned spot” to “Out crimson spot”, but they did not. The delightfully surnamed Thomas and Stephen Bullfinch are guilty of this, in their 1865 edition of Shakespeare’s works. It reminds me of my own children’s scorn for a youth club song, wished upon them by a prig of a guitar toting clergyman, that had a chorus that went: *Amster-naughty word, Amster-naughty word.....*

The literary establishment, during my lifetime, has deplored and resisted almost all forms of bowdlerism and censorship, though I myself have always been a little ambivalent. As too, surprisingly, was the poet Swinburne (1837-1909), a breaker of all sorts of taboos and certainly no prig. He wrote of the Bowdlers:

More nauseous and more foolish cant was never chattered than that which would deride the memory or depreciate the merits of Bowdler. No man ever did better service to Shakespeare than the man who made it possible to put him into the hands of intelligent and imaginative children.



Espaliered magnolia - Chamberlain Street Wells

as one who “*pisseth against a wall*”. Modern versions translate this decorously simply as *man*. Likewise the word *emerod*, coyly translated nowadays as *tumour*, though meaning, in all likelihood, *haemorrhoid*. Coyness of this sort is harmless for it doesn’t violate the text’s essential meaning, but it does dilute our awareness of just how primitive, raw, patriarchal and earthy the ancient biblical world was and that, surely, is a pity.

A golden era

Publishers these days employ professional prigs called *sensitivity readers* to ensure that what they publish is unlikely to be denounced or cancelled and so rendered unprofitable. Manuscripts are sent to firms of ‘specialists’ who offer *sensitivity readers* at a cheaper rate than they can be employed by publishers themselves. Would-be sensitivity readers offer a self-profile to attract business. The incongruity of some of these profiles, writes Zoe Dubno in the Spectator *can be darkly comic. One person’s list includes ‘LGBTQ...abusive relationships... schizophrenia, Pilates... law school... vegan lifestyle... use of an EpiPen’.....* What a far cry all this is from the heady days of 1960 and the celebrated obscenity trial that led to the acquittal of Penguin Books for publishing *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. My salad days, the nineteen sixties, appear to have been something of a golden era.

Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl, by no means an attractive person, apparently something of an anti-semitic and racist (as too was TS Eliot) is now, it seems, to be bowdlerised. Yet children love his stories just as they are, 250 million copies of his books have been sold worldwide. They love him in part, surely, just because he’s transgressive. This is one of the reasons I so love the Bible, for all its cruelty, barbarism and aberrations. In so many, many ways in today’s prissily, priggish world, it is refreshingly and challengingly transgressive. Both Bible and Dahl are best loved, albeit critically and with growing discernment as we mature in faith and years, for what they are, not what they are not.

Jiggery wokery

The bible has been well and truly bowdlerised in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, with minimal protest from the literary establishment. Nor has it all been to do with the jiggery wokery of fashionable causes such as racism, gender and sexual identity. Some biblical bowdlerisation has been closer to old fashioned priggishness. There’s a phrase, translated literally, that occurs six times in the King James version of the bible, it describes a male

(488) “This and That” - 12 March 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



*The Choir
Wells Cathedral*

In those of my Australian parishes that had a hospital I became, willy nilly, a hospital chaplain. It involved a weekly visit to every patient listed as Anglican and also a willingness to be called out to anyone *in extremis* asking for priestly care.

The worst thing about dying

Although limited by hospital regulation to visit only Anglicans, a little bonhomie and humour opened others to my ministrations. In many wards we had so much banter and fun that folk from other denominations and faiths, as well as non-believers, were drawn in. Interesting conversations ensued. One of the most intriguing and funniest comments has stayed with me down the years, it came from a woman who happened to be dying: *You know, Father, what shits me off most about dying is that I shall never be a widow.*

This was not a cynical comment on an unhappy marriage, she appeared to be happily married. It was an expression of wistful regret at being denied the freedom of soaring solo briefly, after a loving but also dutifully selfless lifetime of soaring duo.

Folderol in church

A frequent response from hospital patients to my dog-collared approach was an apologetic, *I'm afraid I'm not much of a churchgoer, father.* My invariable reply was: *Don't let that bother you. We don't worship a God who stoops so low as to count how many times we go to Church.* As indeed we don't. Vicars might, but God does not. He is sublimely above and beyond all such pettifogging, anthropomorphic mundanity.

Going to church is an odd business. Now that I am fully retired it is no longer a professional requirement and yet both Diana and I are going far more than when it was. Twice a day at present. It's a compulsion, an addiction. Perhaps we need help, because as well as God never stooping so low as to count how many times we go to church, nor does he need, require, demand or ask us to tell him over and over again that we love him, or to sing his praises. Nor does he need us to beat our breasts in contrition for our sins, plead for favours if he is to grant them, or to indulge in any other of the folderol that goes on in church.



The organ from the choir

beneath the great organ-bearing choir screen. The service began: *O Lord open thou our lips*, sung by the Precentor. It was the psalm that moved me particularly, for it happened to be the one that had nudged me towards priesthood forty five years ago in Westminster Abbey, sung to the same, simple tune.

Choral Evensong is vicarious worship at its most extreme. All that we're required to do is stand and sit and say a periodic *Amen*. The officiant and choir do the rest. Only on Saturdays do we join in to sing a couple of hymns. It is worship experienced in the imagination through the words, music and actions of others. It is allowing God his say and into our experience and lives by way of architecture and space, music and sound, poetry and scripture, order, beauty and simple ritual. We say *Amen*, bow the knee, are moved and blessed, not because God asks, wants, needs or demands it of us, but simply in response to whom he most gloriously is.

Once God is glimpsed, experienced, allowed to be and assented to in life, worship, be it vicariously in a cathedral or a tad less vicariously in St John's Boldre, or in the amplified decibels of a mega church, is a compulsive necessity.

Chacun à son goût

Last week, out of the blue, I had an email from a priest in Epsom asking me if he could use, in his parish magazine, something that he'd found online that I'd written about John the Baptist. Flattered, I gave him *carte blanche* to do so and, in my friendly fashion, I added to my reply a few words about my years as a youngster on a Mission Station in the African bush called *St John the Baptist, Chikwaka*. I concluded by saying: *I myself have just fully retired to Wells in Somerset where I, and Diana my wife, are inebriated on Choral Evensong, being a mere five minute walk from the Cathedral.... Lovely!* He thanked me and then added: *I'm not at all jealous that you have cathedral Evensong on tap!*

Well, *chacun à son goût*. Choral evensong and vicarious worship mean as little to many clerics as they do to the majority of humankind. Though it is interesting to note that Cathedral style worship is growing not diminishing in popularity.

A wand-bearing virger

What is it that is so good about Choral Evensong? Last Tuesday, in the late afternoon, Diana and I trotted off, as is our wont these days, to the Cathedral's daily offering. We vary where we sit and this time chose the stalls of the back row, on the decanal side of the choir, which is the side upon which the dean sits, the south side. There, beneath an intricately carved stone canopy supported by narrow pillars of polished Purbeck marble, lovely to the touch, and backed by beautiful tapestry, we relaxed as peace and beauty settled down and around us, quieting the mind and soothing the soul. The medieval clock hoarsely chimed the quarter hour after five o'clock, whereupon the choir appeared, led by a wand-bearing virger, through the dark tunnel

The Choir, Wells Cathedral

(487) “This and That” - 5 March 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



The Scissor Arches

To Luddites, technophobes, nostalgics and old fogies, the letters A.I. still abbreviate, first and foremost, *Artificial Insemination*. To the rest of humanity they abbreviate, these days, *Artificial Intelligence*.

An old fogey and a nostalgic, but no Luddite or technophobe, I signed up and logged in to *Chat GPT* last week. It is an Artificial Intelligence *chatbot* launched in November 2022 and its prime function, by way of A.I., is to mimic a human conversationalist, but it can do far more than that. It can write and debug computer programs; it can compose music, teleplays, fairy tales, and student essays; it can answer test questions, write poetry and song lyrics and play games.

Charles and Camilla

It is its prowess as a poet that most interests me. As soon as I had successfully registered and logged myself in, and well before I had fully mastered how to make it work, I asked it to compose a sonnet about Charles and Camilla. In a couple of seconds it spewed out what was a sonnet indeed, albeit a painfully pedestrian one: the first four lines:

*Oh, Charles and Camilla, a tale of love,
Whose passion bloomed despite the world's dismay,
Their hearts entwined as if by grace above,
Their souls united in a fated way.....*

I then asked it to write a quatrain about a certain Canon Andrew Neaum, expecting it to confess total ignorance of this obscure parson. Not at all, in a matter of seconds it spat out:

*Canon Andrew Neaum, a man of faith,
Whose words and deeds inspire and create.
With wisdom, love, and kindness innate,
He guides his flock with a gentle gait.*

Truly dire, especially that last line subjugating sense to rhyme.

I then asked it for a rhyming quatrain satirising churchgoing:

*On Sundays, people dress up in their best,
And head off to church, a pious quest,
But for some, it's just a social affair,
Where they gossip and judge without a care.*

These examples are so banal they reassure a versifier and rhymester, such as myself, that I am in no danger of redundancy, as yet. We are warned, however, that far better results are likely to be forthcoming.

When shall we three meet again

Most of us respond more readily to rhyming verse than to rhymeless *free verse*. The fine poet Robert Frost declared that he would as soon write *free verse as play tennis with the net down*, and G.K. Chesterton said of free verse: *You might as well call sleeping in a ditch “free architecture”*. Rhyme, writes Adam Gopnik:

.....thrives at both poles of literature. It is the material of a greeting card—“Roses are red / Violets are blue / Sugar is sweet / And so are you”—and the high-tragic language of Racine. Rhyme turns language into ritual, and rituals tend to be either levelling and egalitarian, bringing different kinds together to be brethren, as in churches, or exclusive and exalting, advancing a narrow set to elect status, as in clubs. Rhyme does both. In Shakespeare, it can offer the primitive force of incantation, as when the witches ask, “When shall we three meet again / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” And it can also offer the lulling reassurance of stylized speech, as when Juliet tells Romeo, “Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow / That I shall say good night till it be morrow.”

Gopnik goes on to observe that rhyming doesn't come easily in English: “The scarcity of rhyme in English is illustrated” he says, “by the fact that the word ‘scarcity’ itself has no rhymes.... By contrast, the French word for scarcity, *rareté*, has so many acoustic kin that an English rhymester could weep, with *engagé*, *écarté*, and *retardé* leading the pack....”



St Peter's Ugborough, Devon

Doggerel

Writers of light verse, like myself, refuse to call themselves poets, because we either decline, or are unable, to peddle insight, profundity, sublimity and originality. Instead we focus upon satire, comedy, scorn and fun. To do so effectively requires effort, skill, ingenuity, deftness dazzle and dexterity. Public recitations of well wrought light verse are widely appreciated and loudly applauded. Few audiences, however, are without a scyther of tall poppies present, to sidle up afterwards and damn with faint praise and the term *doggerel*!

Doggerel is a word that needs rehabilitation. Shakespeare himself was a lover and master of

doggerel, as too were W.H. Auden, Hilaire Belloc, Robert Burns, Lewis Carroll, Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Frost, W S Gilbert, Rudyard Kipling, Edwin Lear, Spike Milligan, Ogden Nash, Dr. Seuss, John Skelton and Mark Twain.

My very favourite brief piece of light verse is by Lord Byron, it expresses perfectly his contempt for the unfortunate Lord Castlereagh in a mock epitaph:

*Posterity will ne'er survey
a Nobler grave than this:
Here lie the bones of Castlereagh:
Stop, traveller, and piss!*

(486) “This and That” - 26 February 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Beneath a laryngitical medieval clock, coffee and confabulation take place after the Sunday Eucharist in the north transept of Wells Cathedral. The clock's dial portrays a pre-Copernican, geocentric view of the universe, the Sun and Moon revolve around a central, fixed Earth. I empathise, for I too am laryngitical of voice and before my retirement from lovely St John's Boldre, could fancy myself as the very centre of an ordered, pleasing universe. After Sunday worship, at the church door, everyone and everything did indeed appear to revolve around me.



Here comes everybody

My pre-Copernican world has gone. After worship on



Sundays in Wells, dressed in mufti, an insignificant little asteroid, I dodge and bump my way through animated conversationalists to collect a coffee and a biscuit and then look around to see if anyone appears to feel my gravitational attraction. Sometimes they do. A couple of Sundays ago a fellow caught my eye and smiled. After a few introductory pleasantries I asked him what he did and he declared himself to be a historian. So, as you do, I asked a provocative question, “Do you consider there to be any history at all in the Gospels?” An interesting conversation ensued.

Christians like me aren't much bothered by historicity. The boundary between fact and fiction is blurred, both are as likely to conceal truth as reveal it. However, it was good to be reminded by A. N. Wilson, in his recent book “Confessions” that:

....the first Christians were probably all of Founder's Kin, or at least close family friends. The cult which had grown up in Christ's lifetime, and its continuation after the Resurrection (first generation) and came to be written down (second generation), were not told about some imagined figures from

storybooks. They were told about real people whose children and grandchildren were known to the small circle of the Jerusalem church and to the churches in exile, Antioch, Rome. Faith was something handed on by witnesses. I have found, in my life, when faith has vanished, that it is brought back by encounters with people. This is the essence of Catholicism – Joyce calls the Church HCE, or Here Comes Everybody – which is a realized sense of the people stretching back through two thousand years to the people who had actually known and experienced the friendship of Jesus and His mother when they walked this earth.....

Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday

The best way to begin Lent is with a good Shrove Tuesday and so Diana and I decided to redeem a Christmas present voucher for a meal at a pub outside Wells. It would enable us to begin to explore the local countryside and me to enjoy my last alcohol before Easter, a pint of local bitter. The small village of Litton lies in a hollow of the Mendips, just seven miles from Wells. Its pub is warm, friendly, capacious and well patronised. We enjoyed an excellent meal, after which we looked over the village's strangely asymmetrical 13th century parish church and then went on to take a lovely two mile walk around a nearby and surprisingly large dam. In the evening, after Choral Evensong, we made and

guzzled the best pancakes since our return to England nine and a half years ago, a gas hob made the difference. A good Shrove Tuesday.

Ash Wednesday surpassed any that I can remember. On a cold evening, as we turned the corner to cross the Cathedral Close, the sun suddenly came out and against dark cloud and the suspicion of a rainbow, the West End lit up to gleam and glow its beauty, full face. Once inside, settled down at peace near the front, we stood as the choir and sanctuary party entered to sing, at a good pace, *Jesu Lover of my soul* to the fine tune *Aberystwyth*. A well stoked, well smoking thurible led the procession and the musical setting to the Eucharist was by the 17th century master, William Byrd.

Stunned silence

As we queued to be ashed, the choir began Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere*. The treble soloist was heart-stoppingly perfect. A strong, true, silver-clear voice soared with ease to the repeated, eagerly anticipated and incredibly high C, filling a visual symphony of gothic arch behind arch, behind arch with perfect, peerless sound, taking with it heart, soul, mind and devotion. Never had I imagined I would hear that *Miserere* sung in a liturgical setting.

As the darkness deepened outside, so the Cathedral inside lightened, brightened and warmed itself into an outpost of heaven itself in a dark world. The illuminated altar frontal for Lent is arrestingly lovely. Behind it the celebrant, deacon and sub deacon stood gravely calm, and beyond them, in front of the wondrous scissor arch the semi circle of divine choristers. The scissor arch's upper oval is graced by a large Christ-tenanted Cross, flanked by statues of Blessed Mary and St John. Peerlessly framed in stone, they catch and hold the eyes of worshippers frequently prompted to raise them in so wondrous a place. Wow!

This is worship: awe, beauty, gratitude, glory, reverence..... but appropriately offset by the black, oily smudge of ash smeared onto our foreheads, and harking back to and recalling the cruel, cruel banality of a judicial murder two thousand years ago. Paradox, irony and glorious, glorious absurdity. That's what it is all about. That's what it is all about. The choir and altar party processed out in silence, as did we all. Stunned silence. Deo gratias.



The Choir, Wells Cathedral



Wells Cathedral West End

(485) “This and That” - 19 February 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Union Street, Wells

My study is a pleasing nook on the landing of our quirky new home which, two hundred or more years ago, was a mere coach house in Union Street in the City of Wells. In those less prudish, pre-Victorian days this narrow little lane in the city centre was less than salubrious and descriptively named “Grove Street”.

From my desk I look over the balustrade of the stairwell to a randomly stuffed bookcase and a cushioned, wooden armchair where Diana sits whenever we wish to share ideas, poems or banter across the modest canyon of the stairwell. Early each morning, through headphones so as not awaken a still asleep Diana, I listen to eighteenth century *music galant*. It gladdens the heart and lifts the spirits as dawn, through a dormer window, gradually realises the tiled roof of the city’s Roman Catholic Church, beyond an ancient, twenty five foot high, stone wall that forms the boundary of our tiny back-garden of Eden.

Hot pippin pies

Yesterday evening at five past five we strolled up Chamberlain Street to the Cathedral for Evensong. It was the beginning of the half term break and so the Cathedral Chamber Choir sang the service for the handful of us present, sitting in the choir stalls with them. The beautifully sung responses, anthem, two hymns and postlude were all by the 17th century composer Orlando Gibbons, a favourite. Gibbons has bequeathed us a wondrous, cleverly woven medley of the seventeenth century street cries of London. They come to mind whenever we wander Wells City market on Wednesdays and Saturdays:

God give you good morrow, my masters, past three o'clock and a fair morning; new mussels, new lilywhite mussels; new cockles, new great cockles; new great sprats, new; new great lampreys; new great smelts, new; new fresh herrings; new haddock, new; new thornback, new; hot apple pies, hot; hot pippin pies hot; fine pomegranates, fine; hot mutton pies, hot. Buy a rope; ha' ye any old bellows or trays to mend? Rosemary and bays quick and gentle; ripe chestnuts, ripe; buy a cover for a closestool; ripe walnuts, ripe, ripe small nuts, ripe. White cabbage, white young cabbage white; white turnips, white young turnips, white; white parsnips, white young parsnips, white; white lettuce, white young lettuce white. Buy any ink, will you buy any ink, very fine writing ink, will you buy any ink? Ha' ye any rats or mice to kill? I have ripe peascods, ripe. Oysters, oysters, oysters, threepence a peck at Bridewell dock, new Wallfleet oysters. Oyez, if any man or woman can tell any tidings of a grey mare with a long mane and a short tail, she halts down right before, and is stark lame behind and was lost the thirtieth day of February, he that can tell any tidings of her, let him come to the Crier, and he shall have well for his hire.... and much more...

A failure of imagination

I have now downloaded Kindle to my phone. It means I am able to dip into whatever I happen to be reading wherever I happen to be. At present I delight in A.N. Wilson's "Confessions". He is almost an exact contemporary of mine with many of the same interests and preoccupations, though a good deal cleverer. What an exhilarating read it is. Here's a snatch to give atheists pause for thought:

It is probably a commonplace of materialist scepticism that Joan, the violent teenager-soldier who heard voices inside her head, was a classic case of paranoid schizophrenia. Equally, I have always liked the exchange in Shaw's 'Saint Joan' when, at her trial, she is told that her voices are only her imagination, and she replies that of course this is the case, for how else, save through our imagination, could God speak to us? I know that Shaw was a sceptic, but the exchange can be interpreted to justify either opinion. Whatever we understand of the divine surely comes to us through this means. During the dark phases of life when I have told myself that I have lost my faith (and the central decade of my life, my forties, was one of almost total scepticism), what I have actually been suffering from is a failure of imagination.

Self discipline

Retirement removes most of the deadlines that spur us on to achieve anything worthwhile. This little article, though an enjoyable task and possibly the beginning of what might well become a fortnightly continuation of my *Boldre This and That* column (happily released from its weekly pew-sheet deadline), does require a surge of self discipline. As too does resisting the temptation to wear the same clothes day after day. An Australian story illustrates the advisability of so doing:

At shearing time, an ancient, sun-wizened swaggie turned up at the shearing shed of a large property in Victoria's Western Districts, looking for work. This he was duly given. However, he always slept in the clothes he wore and was so filthy and smelly the roustabouts and shearers decided to treat him to an enforced shower. He was duly grabbed and stripped. Layer, after layer was peeled off his scrawny frame until, to their astonishment, they came upon a school satchel.

(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'être*, 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.



Lovely St John's Boldre, in Spring

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!"*

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