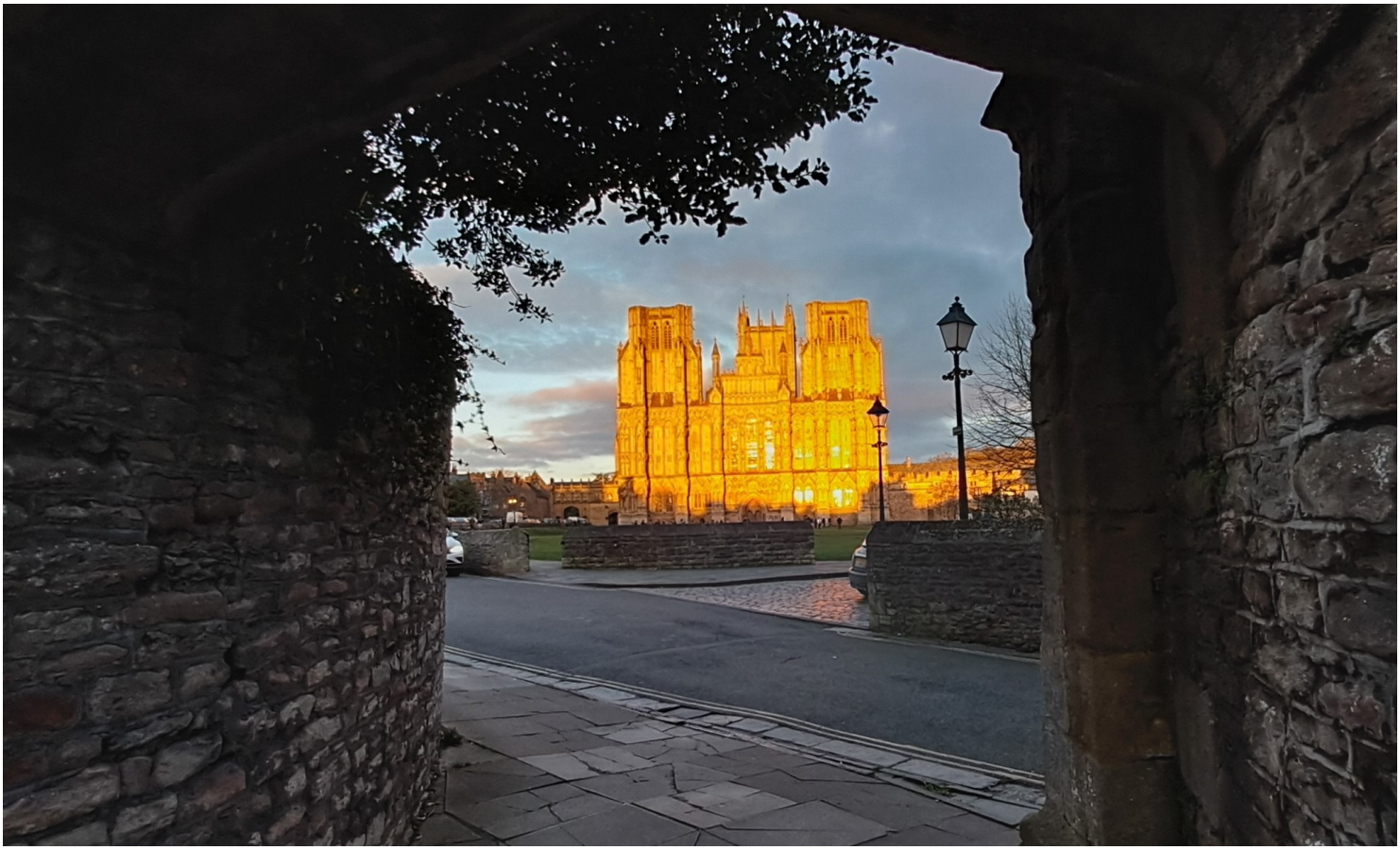
Home

FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

August to December 2023



St Andrew's Cathedral
Wells, Somerset

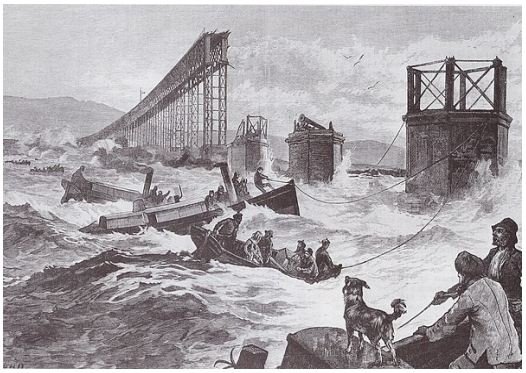
The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired, with much gratitude and many regrets as the "House for Duty" Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice at the end of January 2023 to the centre of the Cathedral City of Wells in Somerset.

The articles that follow are the continuation of his weekly pew-sheet ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations now 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

(530) “This and That” - 31 December 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Tay Bridge Disaster - William McGonagall verse

Staffordshire, Tristan da Cunha, the African bush, Merthyr Tydfil, Harare, Gatooma, St Helena, Skipton, Ararat, Wodonga, Shepparton and Boldre, have something in common. They’ve been venues for Neaum family Christmas Day feasts. For exoticism, this year, 1923, beats them all: Bognor Regis! (George V’s purported last words: “bugger Bognor”). Our munificent hosts for a large family gathering were the parents in law of my daughter Rachel. “What can we contribute to the festivities” I asked Gill and Christian, “One of your poems” they said. An irresistible challenge. What rhymes with Bognor Regis?

The writing of light verse, or‘doggerel’ to those who feel a need to put you in your place, is a time-consuming, utterly absorbing task. Nor is it disdained by the finest of poets: Shakespeare 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, John Skelton and Mark Twain. The stuff I write is almost always prompted by an occasion: a wedding, baptism, birthday or whatever. It is “occasional verse” that cocks a snook at prim propriety and perfection and delights in ingenious or outrageous rhymes, metronomic metres, frivolity and humour. Written to be declaimed, it calls for dramatic recitation and a sympathetic audience. Stuffy elitists deplore it, a fine poet and translator of poems like Dick Davis, born in the same year as me, does not:

Preferences

1 To my surprise
I've come to realize
I don't like poetry

2 (Dear, drunkly woozy,
Accommodating floozy
That she's obliged to be,

3 Poor girl, these days).
No, what I love and praise
Is not damp poetry

4 But her pert, terse,
Accomplished sibling: verse.
She's the right girl for me.

The worst poet in the English language

William McGonagall has long been hailed the worst poet in the English language, but among Scottish poets he’s second only to Rabbie Burns for popular recognition. In the 1960s, those of us quaffing Castle lager in the Student’s Union of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, would sometimes hear his verse loudly declaimed by a Scottish student to the appreciative applause of dire-verse cognoscenti. It is impossible to hear or read it without laughing and yet there is as much about the man and his verse to be admired as derided. Unlike many more esteemed poets, he’s earned his very own biography: *“No Poets' Corner in the Abbey”*, by David Phillips, sadly now out of print.

Lay on Macduff

McGonagall was born in 1825, the fifth child of impoverished Irish immigrants to Scotland in search of work in the hand loom weaving trade, already beginning to be superseded by machines. They moved on to Orkney where his father became a ‘pedlar’ and then to Dundee, on the Firth of Tay, nowadays regarded as his home town, hence his two poems on the *Tay Rail Bridge*. He received no more than eighteen months of formal schooling before being sent to work at the looms himself and yet, during his teens, he developed a passion for Shakespeare and the theatre and so went on to become an actor.

He proved a popular performer with the working class mill hand and weaver ‘groundlings’, though more for his outrageous antics on stage than for his skills as an actor. There’s a Glasgow newspaper report of him as Macbeth, in a third encore of the duel with Macduff, refusing to go down when run through with his opponents sword. Instead he *“maintained his feet and flourished his weapon about the ears of his adversary, crying repeatedly: ‘Lay on, Macduff; and damned be*

him that first cries 'Hold' enough...." Macduff finally managed to resolve things *"in a rather undignified way by taking the feet from under the principal character".*

At the age of 52 he took to writing verse which he distributed as tuppenny pamphlets, but also, in enthusiastic public recitations, he used the same skills he had used as an actor. A Glasgow journalist at one such event reported: "*After reciting some of his own poems to an accompaniment of whistles and cat-calls, the Bard armed himself with a most dangerous-looking broadsword and strode up and down the platform declaiming "Clarence's dream" and "Give me another horse!" His voice rose to a howl. He thrust and slashed at imaginary foes. A shower of apples and oranges fell on the platform. Almost before they touched, they were met by the fell edge of McGonagall's claymore, and cut to pieces. The audience yelled with delight; McGonagall yelled louder still, and with a fury which I fancy was not wholly feigned."* He was a performance poet par excellence.

Knight of the White Elephant, Burmah

There's something very attractive about him though. He took himself hugely seriously, refused ever to be put down, and although he lacked a sense of humour he was public spirited, utterly sincere and irrepressibly positive . In a perceptive Guardian article James Campbell writes: *The faint air of risibility that comes off the name itself, which resembles the noise made when you gargle salt water, was made richer by some students who, in 1894, sent a letter bestowing on him the elaborate title, "Sir William Topaz McGonagall, Poet and Knight of the White Elephant, Burmah", a handle he used, without the least knowing wink, until his death at 77, one year after his beloved Queen Victoria.* He was buried in a pauper's grave. To read his poems will raise a laugh from anyone with a sense of humour. To anyone with a heart there might well be admiration and possibly even love.

Christmas in Bognor Regis 2023

Under Gill and Christian's aegis
It's good to mark the birth of Jesus
In the town of Bognor Regis,
Deemed by George the Fifth egregious.

Or so is claimed (though doubtless rot)
By that snooty Brighton lot
Who, four and twenty miles due east,
Are anxious never to be fleeced,
Or rivalled by a seaside town
Granted royalty renown.

Our Bognor Regis stable door,
Like that in Bethlehem of yore,
Has opened onto fond largesse
And generous kindness's caress.
Today's dramatis personae,
Not ox and ass, but you and I.

The innkeeper and gracious spouse
Such hospitality espouse
As opens providence's door
To bounteous provender galore.

The infant babe, God's billet doux,
Is not newborn, he's now aged two,
A dearly loved and cherished child,
More sweetly wild, than meek and mild.

But best of all, his fortune's bloomed,
Because a sibling's now enwombed
Who, like Jesus (thank you mother)
Will have a lad called James as brother.

May the two of them both bond
With mum and dad to family fond,
A family happily extended
By Hances, Greenes and Neaums blended
With Bretts and Barkleys. What a mix!
What a sparkling box of tricks!

So under Gill and Christian's aegis
The seaside town of Bognar Regis
Connects to Bethlehem and Jesus.
What's more the very title, "Regis",
For Bethlehem's the perfect fit
An infant king being born in it.

So raise a glass to Bognor Regis
And one to Bethlehem as Regis,
To doggerel rhymes and verse egregious,
To Gill and Christian's bounteous aegis,
To one and all, to you and I,
Today's dramatis personae.

Regis: *Honorific title signifying royal associations*
Dramatis pesonae *Characters of a play or narrative*
James: *Two year old grandson, also Jesus' brother*

(529) “This and That” - 24 December 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The story of Jesus is a love song, a heart-stopping, heart-breaking love song. Jesus’s birth, Christmas, is a vital verse in the lovely song, though not the first.

Love songs, viewed objectively, literally and critically are nonsense, over the top, embarrassing. I’ve just looked cynically at the lyrics of what are considered some of today’s greatest, popular love songs. My lip curled in scorn as I read them. “What rubbish!” I thought, “what nonsense, junk, piffle, balderdash, codswallop.”

“Hold on though, Andy Pandy, you cynical twerp” I retort to myself “are there not some love songs you view differently?” There are indeed! They are those that take me right back to when I was madly, head over heels in love myself. The *Vauxhall Songs* of Johann Christian Bach I first listened to when deeply in love in South Africa’s Grahamstown, during the early nineteen seventies. I’ve just listened to them again on Spotify. Oh how lovely, lovely, lovely they are, though utterly inconsequential, dilly daft nonsense, but they take me back to the yearning, yearning, yearning of an ancient love.

Lack-a-day-dee!

Another favourite love song is just as daft, if not more so. It’s that odd, and deliciously melancholic love song from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Yeoman of the Guard*, with its ingenious, poignant, lovely tune:

.... the song of a merrymaid, peerly proud,
who loved a lord, and who laughed aloud
at the moan of the merryman, moping mum,
whose soul was sad, and whose glance was glum,
who sipped no sup, and who craved no crumb,
as he sighed for the love of a ladye!
Heighdy! heighdy! Misery me — lack-a-day-dee!
He sipped no sup, and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a ladye!

I have just listened to it on Spotify and how lovely, lovely, lovely it is, though utterly inconsequential, dilly daft nonsense, but taking me back to the yearning, yearning, yearning of a rather less ancient love. It reminds me too of the most wondrous and essential characteristic of all authentic love, which is that the self, the self that is so, so dear to itself, wholly surrenders itself. It is life’s most glorious miracle, life’s only unequivocal miracle. The self that is so, so dear to itself, surrenders itself.

In the teeth of the evidence

The bible has its love songs, the best of them being the lyrical *Song of Songs*, but the whole book, the whole bible is an intriguing love song. Undergirding and animating it is a slowly and fitfully growing awareness that although the world it depicts is violent, pointless, mystifying and loveless, somehow, against all the odds, in the teeth of all the evidence, there is a love of loves and a lover of lovers holding it in existence. It invites us to suppose that self-surrendering love is life’s raison d’etre, that the reason we exist is to learn to love, is to die to self and love the other and one another. It challenges the self that is so, so dear to itself to surrender itself. It is life’s most glorious miracle, life’s only unequivocal miracle.

The crux of the Christian bible love song is the Cross, upon which a lyrical lover, the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth, shows how and what it is, for the self so, so dear to itself, to surrender itself for his beloved. It is life’s most glorious miracle, life’s only unequivocal miracle.

On Good Friday a hundred thousand liturgies, all over the world, celebrate this love by singing one of the most poignant of love lyrics, its words are plucked from here and there in the bible, and it is called *The Reproaches.* It’s a love song of love songs, a carol of sad carols in which a dying lover, Jesus, sings:

O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!

I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom,
but you led your Saviour to the cross.
For forty years I led you safely through the desert.
I fed you with manna from heaven,
and brought you to a land of plenty:
but you led your Saviour to the cross.
O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!

What more could I have done for you?
I planted you as my fairest vine,
but you yielded only bitterness:
When I was thirsty you gave me vinegar to drink,
and you pierced your Saviour's side with a lance.
O my people, what have I done to you?
How have I offended you? Answer me!

Love despised, rejected, crucified, but loving, loving to the end. Oh, to be so loved, to be so loved, to be so loved.

We are, we are. That is the song our faith sings to us. It is the carol of carols that celebrates life's most glorious miracle, life's only unequivocal miracle.

In a remarkable poem inspired by listening to the great violinist Kreisler play in Cardiff, the poet R S Thomas gets life's most glorious and only unequivocal miracle right:

Musician

A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

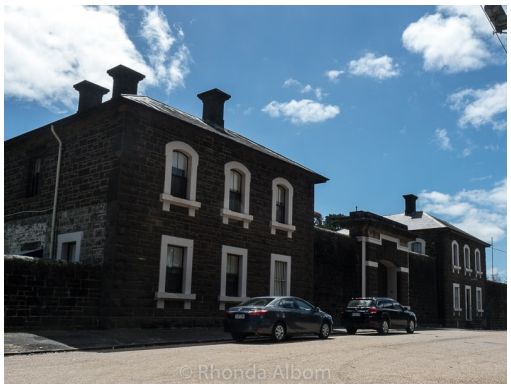
(528) “This and That” - 17 December 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

To many thoughtful people it's lunacy to be a Christian. Robert M Pirsig, the author of what is claimed to be the best selling philosophical book of all time in America: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,* famously observed that "when one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity, when many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion".

If personal experience is anything to go by he might well be right. In the early nineteen sixties he himself was in and out of psychiatric hospitals. On being diagnosed with schizophrenia he underwent electroconvulsive therapy on numerous occasions, poor fellow.

Lunacy in Ararat



Ararat’s ‘J Ward’ today

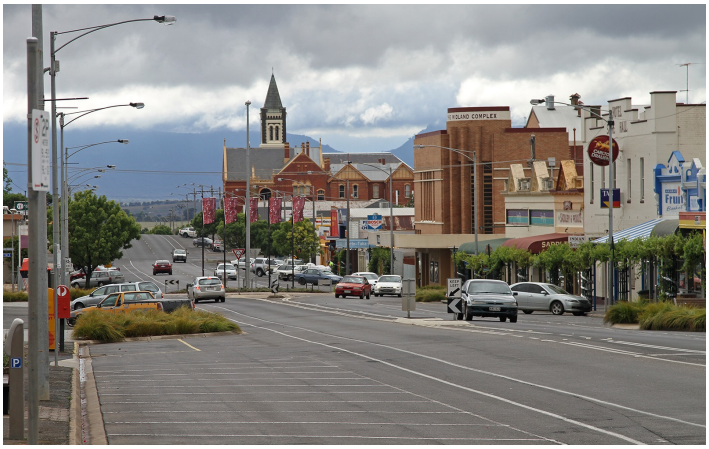
It is easy enough to put an opposite case and to argue that believing in God is the surest and soundest form of sanity, but there's a different approach that I find more congenial. For six years I had a fair bit to do with lunatics as rector of the parish of Ararat in Australia. With a few exceptions I found them to be refreshingly different, uniquely likeable and sometimes profoundly good. What is more, the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth himself was accused of lunacy: *“He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?”*

At Ararat I regularly celebrated the Eucharist in the town's old Forensic Centre, known as “J Ward”, where those diagnosed as "criminally insane" were incarcerated. I also visited and took services in “Aradale”, a large institution for the mentally ill. Though sometimes fraught, this was rewarding and brought me to conclude that accusations of lunacy are possibly less insulting than complimentary. Eyes opened by the likes of Jesus of Nazareth and our poets to more oblique ways of seeing things, open our hearts to love the unloved and value the unvalued.

The best of all tucker

In the grim, high, bluestone-walled J Ward, now a museum, thee was a pleasing little chapel formed by joining two cells. There, once a fortnight, always with a pair of warders present because the inmates were considered unpredictable and possibly dangerous, I celebrated the Eucharist for a congregation of six or seven well muscled and heavily tattooed men. To make sense of the Gospel in a short homily to such folk required imagination. As often as not they would challenge what I said, or comment upon it, or ask difficult questions, usually to do with sex. The secret was to take seriously whatever they said and to empathise with them, in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth and so never descend into condescension, judgement or outrage.

In that little chapel I administered the consecrated host to a muscle-bound hulk once whose response has stayed with me. He smacked his lips loudly and expostulated with deep feeling: “Good tucker that! It knocks the demons out of yer.” I thought to myself: “Yes, you’ve got it right, that’s a refreshing response to God’s presence in the Eucharist”.



Barkly Street, Ararat

Authenticating parish worship

A large proportion of the mentally disabled are no longer institutionalised. Even way back then, in the nineteen nineties, many were well embedded in the community and some of them, it is pleasing to note, found their way into local parish church congregations. One such became a valued parishioner in Ararat, she was a large woman of about forty whose speech impediment soon ceased

to impede her, because there were members of the congregation who took the trouble to learn how to make sense of what she said and interpret it to the rest of us. She dearly loved Holy Trinity Ararat. Early every Sunday, before light dawned in winter and talking to herself, she arrived to set up the cups for tea after the 9.30am Eucharist. She also put the pew leaflets into the hymn books and greeted anyone she knew with a smothering hug. During worship she sat at the front of the church and sang familiar hymns with unrestrained, less than tuneful delight. That she should find, in our congregation and church, acceptance, safety and joy authenticated our parish life and worship more than anything else we were, or did.

Rapturous fiddling

When I was the vicar of St Paul's Cathedral (not the one in the City of London, but a rather more interesting one on the Island of St Helena) I visited the island's small mental hospital twice a month. On my way I picked up an elderly, home-based, mentally disabled kindly man with his beloved fiddle. He accompanied our hymns in a virtuosic, often out of synch rapture, lost to the world in joy. Those services are wondrous to recall. All the nurses and warders attended and took full and wholehearted part, singing the hymns fervently.

One of the patients was a roly-poly, Down's Syndrome lad who had spent his early years confined, by his simple family, in a large box until liberated into the island's homely little mental institution. He splutterered and fidgeted a lot which was easily tolerated, but on one unforgettable occasion, during a dramatic pause in my brief homily, he broke wind with sufficient force and resonance to elicit an involuntary gasp of admiration from his fellow inmates and stifled guffaws from their carers. Swallowing my own mirth I pressed on regardless, but later, on recounting the incident to a friend, she retorted without a moment's hesitation: "I would have thought that to be fair comment on your sermons!"

There's no point or sense in romanticising lunacy or madness. Many of its manifestations are truly terrible and frightening both to those who suffer them and to their loved ones. However there is another side to the affliction. In a perceptive poem, Charles Causley contrasts the sometimes brilliant and metaphorical world of madness with the prosaic and literal world of sanity, even of "Christian" sanity. An excess of rationality, logic, order and coherence can be arid, cold and soulless compared to the zaniness, foolishness, extravagance and even madness of religion which, at its most authentic, is so invigorating, refreshing and profoundly true.

Healing a Lunatic Boy

Charles Causley

1 Trees turned and talked to me,
Tigers sang,
Houses put on leaves,
Water rang.
Flew in, flew out
On my tongue's thread
A speech of birds
From my hurt head.

2 At my fine loin
Fire and cloud kissed,
Rummaged the green bone
Beneath my wrist.
I saw a sentence
Of fern and tare
Write with loud light
The mineral air.

3 On a stopped morning
The city spoke,
In my rich mouth
Oceans broke.
No more on the spun shore
I walked unfed.
I drank the sweet sea,
Stones were bread.

4 Then came the healer
Grave as grass,
His hair of water
And his hands of glass.
I watched at his tongue
The white words eat,
In death, dismounted
At his stabbed feet.

5 Now river is river
And tree is tree,
My house stands still
As the northern sea.
On my hundred of parables
I heard him pray,
Seize my smashed world,
Wrap it away.

6 Now the pebble is sour,
The birds beat high,
The fern is silent,
The river dry.
A seething summer
Burned to bone
Feeds at my mouth
But finds a stone.

527 Advent/Christmas greetings from Andrew and Diana in Wells, Somerset (Dec 2023)

At 5.45am today, still shower-warm, my bald head tea-cosy cosseted by a beanie and delighted by the haunting, shiver-my-timbers calling of tawny owls, I walked briskly from the western perimeter of Wells to our home at its centre, in less than five minutes. The temperature zero, the wind bitter.

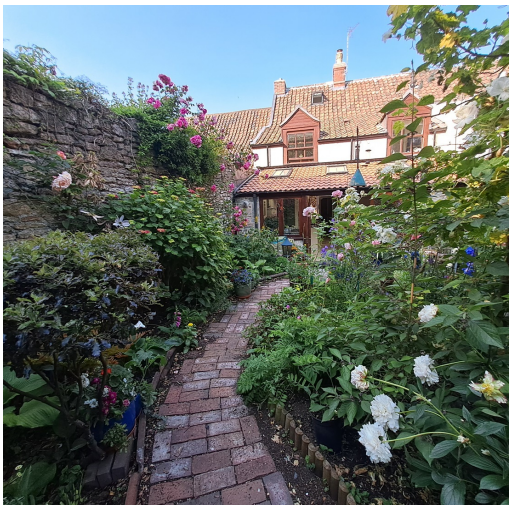
Our home has no garage, we can park nearby free of charge only between 6.00pm and 9.00am. I was out early to deposit the car in our favoured un-metered spot before someone else snaffled it. No hardship in a city where calling owls can be heard in the high street and where, in the garden of our city-centre home, fifteen species of bird have befriended us so far. Faraway is close by, nearby is every where.

At this time last year we were still minding St John's Boldre, in the New Forest and camping only for a day or two at time in our newly purchased Wells home. We sat on folding chairs, ate at a card table and slept on the bedroom floor on a borrowed mattress. The heating system was too complicated for our simple minds to fathom and the roof leaked with derisive malice, but, but, only a five minute walk to the Cathedral. We love it.

It was at the end of January 2023, after ten busy, fulfilling years at St John's Boldre and a hugely generous farewell, that we at last fully retired and moved into our new abode. Scaffolding to re-tile the roof was erected at the same time and because February was all but totally dry, the able and amiable roofing team of a Dad and two sons completed their task by February 24. We are now well insulated, re-tiled, rain-proofed and content.

Irrelevant and peripheral

It has been a good year, with its greatest challenges private, inward and psychological rather than public, professional and physical. I have applied for and been granted "Permission to Officiate" in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, but was directed to undertake no priestly duties for six months. This is to allow retired clerics time to adjust to being totally irrelevant and peripheral outsiders, after so many years of being at the very centre and heart of every community they've lived in since their ordination. I am now, finally, about to join a rota of 'Day Chaplains' at the Cathedral. It involves wandering the building in a cassock, available and willing to engage with any visitor desirous or in need of a word and a reminder to all sightseers that the Cathedral is an active place of worship as well as a tourist attraction. At designated times chaplains offer a brief, inclusive prayer into the microphone.



Watertight

Andrew's four children and families

The year's highlight was a three week visit from Peter, my oldest son, who lives in Australia. He is good and witty company and loved Wells and our quirky little dwelling. He advised and directed us in the purchase of two new computers and helped set them up. We introduced him to cider making, took him sight-seeing to Wales and on a canal barge trip, joined by his brother David and nephew Thomas. When he moved on to stay with David and his family in the Chiddingfold Rectory, we moved nearby shortly thereafter, to mind the dogs of Diana's son 'Pula in Haslemere and were joined by my daughter Ray, her husband Tom and their two year old James for much fun and frivolity. We hope to see Peter in Australia next year, as well as Elizabeth, Nathan and their four girls in Tasmania. Peter and Elizabeth are the best communicators of my four children, I suppose just because they're so distant. We talk often and long, by way of Skype. Elizabeth, while full of laughter, is also a centre of gravity and sanity for the family. Her husband Nathan has left the large accounting group he's been a part of since moving to Tasmania to set up his own business, a courageous venture that we are confident will be successful. Their four girls are exuberantly delightful and voluble on Skype.

Son David, now a non stipendiary priest, works in the City of London as *Sustainable Finance Education Manager* for Aviva Investors. Rachel Greene, his wife, remains the accomplished and scholarly Rector of Chiddingfold, a lovely Surrey village with a beautiful church and rectory. Their son Thomas goes to the local school and is the wisest of nine year olds able, a mere lifted eyebrow questions anything mere adults attest.

My daughter Ray, son in law Tom and two year old James are expecting an addition to their family in April. As if that's not momentous enough they are also planning to leave London to buy a house in the Haslemere and Chiddingfold area. Tom is a boffin with BP and Ray a full time mother to the loveliest and liveliest of little fellows. She and James stayed with us for about a week recently and the Cathedral, in wet weather, became his play pen, a glorious space to explore and fixate upon the medieval astronomical clock of which he still talks with awe and wonder. The clock has a figure, called the *Quarter Jack,* who chimes a bell with his hammer and taps two bells with his heel to ring out the time, as he does so horsemen revolve above the clock face. James is the only two year old in England with the term *Quarter Jack* in his daily vocabulary.

Diana's two children and families

'Pula, Diana's son, like Nathan, desirous of change, has just left his job with Ernst and Young to negotiate a new and attractive position elsewhere which he takes up in the New Year. In the meantime he enjoys plenty of golf, cycling, cooking, gardening and delighting in his two accomplished girls, Mariana and Zoe, both doing exceedingly well at school. Their mother Olga continues teaching art part time and produces all sorts of imaginative artwork to sell successfully. We visit them in Haslemere to mind their two dogs and enjoy splendid hospitality, often shared with David and family from nearby Chiddingfold. Martha, Diana's daughter, lives with her husband Llew and family at West Horrington, two miles from Wells. She continues to run her massage business and often pops in to see us. We visit them regularly to mind our vegetable "allotment" in their garden and to enjoy their company. Nine year old Theo, a bright eyed, compulsive reader, loves visiting us and is more familiar with the workings of our television and the inside of our chocolate biscuit cupboard than we are. Llew is a tree surgeon, but also now a qualified counsellor after six years of part time study. It is a profession that over the next few years will gradually take over from physically demanding tree surgery. His counsel over a beer I've enjoyed for years, he's a natural. Their son Max is enjoying his Bath Spa University music studies and his sister 'Bella is a self possessed, talented lass, pulling beer in a fascinating pub while planning an exciting future.

Freedom to roam

The freedom granted by retirement enabled us to spend an intriguing week in Cyprus to help a friend dispose of an investment property there and to enjoy two stints in beautiful Devon. On the second of these we pressed on to Cornwall to visit a Guinea Fowl Boys High School friend of mine, not seen since 1963. We picked up where we had left off, it was a heart-warming visit. Those we stayed with in Devon are gracious friends of Diana's, the husband a fellow student with her at Lancaster university. We've also been twice to Wales, first with Peter to visit hospitable relatives of Diana and next to attend a great party. We've been four or five times back to Boldre, for a variety of functions and to London likewise. We also managed to visit a friend from my University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland days, now a retired priest in Clacton on Sea, always a great joy, and in Bognor Regis we celebrated Tom's grandfather's ninety ninth birthday party.

Diana and I continue to love each other and remain the best of friends. She laughs at my jokes, praises my cooking and appreciates, without taking too seriously, the many pretty compliments I pass her, having a good ear for irony. I ask for little else. I admire enormously her attention to detail, focus and omni-competence, as well as her hugely efficient but also casual and almost contemptuous domesticity. With reluctance she has to defer to me sometimes in the workshed and in matters electronic. We are, I like to think, a good team.

Dropping off the twig is the melancholy downside of the many, many compensations that come with ageing and retirement and so there have been the inevitable funerals to attend, or not. The poet Alicia Ostriker, born in 1937, is eight years older than me and has articulated the blessings of old age admirably in some of her verse. As an old dog now myself, it is the last stanza of the following verse that I particularly relish and aspire to, aided by our daily worship in a beautiful cathedral:

The Blessing of the Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog

To be blessed	To be blessed	To be blessed
said the old woman	said the dark red tulip	said the dog
is to live and work	is to knock their eyes out	is to have a pinch
so hard	with the slug of lust	of God
God's love	implied by	inside you
washes right through you	your up-ended skirt	and all the other
like milk through a cow		dogs can smell it

(526) "This and That" - 3 December 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The Cornish word for a hill or headland is "pen", which is why so many names in Cornwall begin with that syllable. It's one that almost invariably brings to mind and prompts me to recite the second line of a children's rhyming story. My father read it to us, his children, in a Staffordshire vicarage in the nineteen fifties, before we left for Tristan da Cunha:

Summer holidays had started:
Pen and Gwen were sleeping late.
Mother Penguin came and called them,
"Hurry! Breakfast cannot wait!"

On Tristan da Cunha we had a rockhopper penguin as a pet for a while which we fed on raw fish and tinned pilchards. I have no problems with raw fish, tinned pilchards still fill me with disgust.

Wandering beauties of the night

We made a pilgrimage last week to a town once famous for pilchards. Tons and tons and tons of them were caught there, mostly for their oil which was used, among many other things, to fuel the street lamps of London. Oil commended in an anonymous verse for conveniently lighting up the faces of London's ladies of the night, to reveal evidence of their beauty or of the ravages of syphilis.

Pilchards! Whose bodies yield the fragrant oil,
And makes the London lamps at midnight smile;
Which lamps, wide spreading salutary light,
Beam on the Wandering Beauties of the night,
And show each gentle youth their cheeks' deep roses,
And tell him, whether they have eyes and noses.

The town we visited is one to which I am deeply indebted and have long wanted to explore, thanks to the Cornish poet Charles Causley, who introduced me to it in a poem I have used many times in homilies. Both the poem and the town are called *Mevagissey,* after two sixth century Irish missionaries, Meva and Issey who arrived to convert the locals to Christianity. The word "hag" is Cornish for "and": *Meva hag Issey.*

Oggy, oggy, oggy

We visited the town's parish church first and then its fine harbour, both of them featured in the poem. We also bought two Cornish pasties, a victual that I've avoided ever since eating a particularly foul specimen in Echuca, a town on the banks of Australia's Murray River. Samuel Pepys had a similar experience, his diary reports: "*....dined at Sir W. Pen's ... on a damned venison pasty, that stunk like a devil*". The Australian brute didn't stink, but was filled with an unappetising, grey and mostly vegetable sludge. The two Mevagissey specimens would have been fine had we eaten them immediately, but we were visiting friends for both lunch and dinner and so kept them for the following day's lunch, on the way home. They were eaten cold, overlooking the Teign river estuary, their pastry was thick, heavy and hard as concrete. Cornish pasties, or 'oggies", used to provide local tin miners with a portable meat and two veg meal in one (plus onion). To thoroughgoing carnivores they are not toothsome enough. The filling used in the pasties I make at home for favoured guests is all meat.

Like a lifeboat down the slip

The Anglican church in Mevagissey is dedicated to St Peter, hence the beginning of Causley's poem: "Mevagissey":

1) *Peter jumped up in the pulpit*
His hands all smelling of fish,
His guernsey was gay with the sparky spray
And white as an angel's wish.

2) *The seagulls came in through the ceiling*
The fish flew up through the floor,
Bartholomew laughed as he cast off aft
And Andrew cast off fore.

3) *They charged the thundering churchyard*
Like a lifeboat down the slip,
And the congregation in consternation
Prepared to abandon ship.

4) *Overboard went the bonnets*
Over went the bowlers
And, before the seas were up to their knees,
A hundred holy rollers.

It's a rollicking beginning guaranteed to enliven even the dullest sermon. It fêtes the church when it was young and vibrant and suggests that professional fishermen, like Jesus' first disciples, might well be more authentic models for Christian evangelists than the glib, slick, smooth, evangelical and American-inspired professionals of today.

It reminds us too that in the Church's youth there was something swashbuckling, unconstrained, wild and courageous about discipleship and that even today God's will blows where it lists, challenging disciples to play a part in defining and determining his will, to be partners in a thrilling enterprise with the power to blast us from our dull rut.

The risk, unpredictability and excitement in the faith of the early Church are still available. The struggle to reconcile what we want with what God wants can be titanic, creative and stimulating. Authentic Christianity sparkles, is most certainly not a journey into dull puritanism, wowserism, school- marmish censoriousness and conventionality.

5) *"Draw your tots!" said Peter,*
"Every man to his post!
It's not so far to heaven's bar
With the charts I've got of the coast!

6) *"Shoot the boom like Satan!*
Prepare to take on boarders!
Send up your prayers like signal-flares!
I'll steam the secret orders!

7) *"Stoke up the engine-room boilers*
With slices of heavenly toast!
The devil's a weasel and travels on diesel
But I burn the Holy Ghost!"

The boy-voiced boat

The poem's final five verses change the mood. The young faith of St Peter's era, so radically challenging is also frightening. It is far safer to be just a cultural Christian, a lover of a dead not a living tradition, of sunbeams on stones, architecture, heritage and choral Evensong, not of intriguing, radical Jesus of Nazareth who invites us to open up to the challenging, swashbuckling faith or St Peter and his mates; to be receptive to a faith that animates and exhilarates a community which, by worshipping in ancient buildings, authenticates their existence; receptive to the faith of *Captain Pete*, which grants purpose to lives, attracts boarders, dares us to stoke the engine room boilers with slices of heavenly toast and to love radically. Even in Mevagissey attendance falls and there is only a one Sunday a month priest. All over the UK, rural churches decline.

8) *What became of the vessel*
Nobody dared enquire,
But the new church-room is tough as a tomb
And the walls are very much higher.

9) *Its anchor is glittering granite,*
Its cable is long as Lent,
But the winds won't reek, and refuse to speak
In a silent sail of cement.

10) *Its mast is made of iron,*
Its gunwales are made of lead,
Its cargo of bone is hard as the stone
That hangs about my head.

11) *I walk all day in the dockyard*
Looking for Captain Pete,
But there's not a marine or a brigantine
At the bottom of Harbour Street.

12) *The boy-voiced boat, like summer,*
Has sailed away over the hills
And I'm beached like a bride by the travelling tide
With a packet of seasick pills.

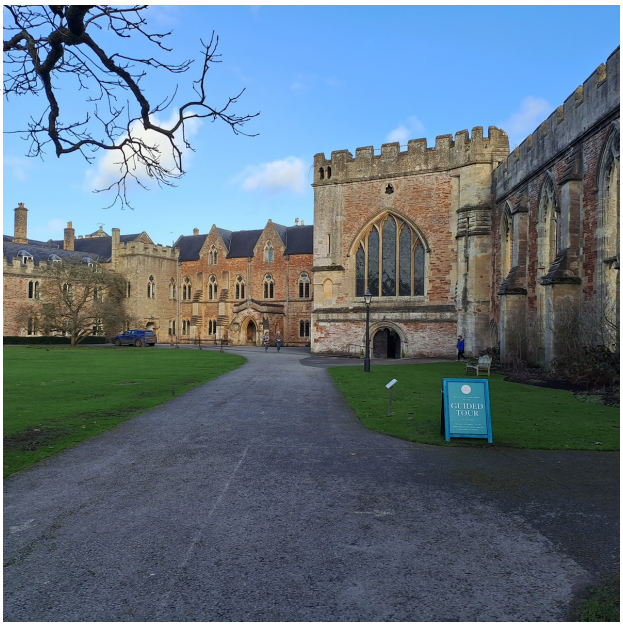
(525) "This and That" - 26 November 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Nothing sacred is safe. Nothing profane is secure. The kiss of Judas Iscariot that betrayed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is now, in the twenty first century, rivalled for infamy by the kiss of the Spanish football coach Luis Rubiales which horrified Jenni Hermoso in Sydney.

We don't know if Judas was ever called upon to defend his indefensible kiss, but Rubiale's attempt to do so for his was less than convincing. Judas hanged himself in remorse. Rubiales resigned without remorse. The last two lines of an interesting poem called *Slant,* by Stephen Dunn (*1939-2021*) might well have provided Rubiales with a more imaginative, novel and interesting line of defence in his attempt at self-exculpation:

I'll always deny that I kissed her.
I was just whispering into her mouth.



Bishop's Palace, Wells, Somerset

Evolution loves you

Another thought provoking poem by Stephen Dunn is called: *At The Smithville Methodist Church*. In thirteen stanzas it tells of the poet and his wife's discomfiture when their young daughter comes home from the first day of an Arts and Crafts Week at the Smithville Methodist Church with a "*Jesus Saves"* button. They manage to rationalise away their discomfiture because Jesus, they decide, was a good man, and "putting faith in good men" is necessary "to stay this side of cynicism....". They leave her to enjoy her week at the church without intervening, but when she comes home singing "Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so," they decide it is "time to talk". Again, though, on reflection, they funk it, because:

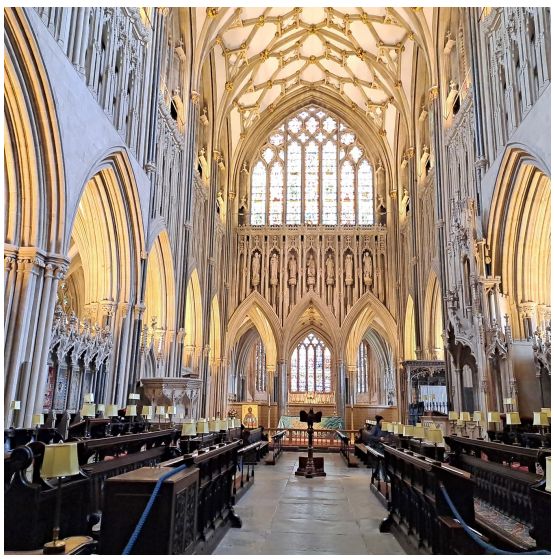
Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief to a child,
only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story nearly as good.....

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes. You can't say to your child
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus. There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along in silence.

A good thing too. The Christian story is a pearl of unsurpassable price. As the novelist Francis Spufford says "... absolutes we cannot possibly comprehend gleam momentarily into sight on the moving surfaces of represented people and events. Gospel truth is story truth."



The Choir - Wells Cathedral

Mixed, tangled, complicated

Here's a revealing little story to do with the will of God: "A parishioner, visiting the vicarage of his little country parish, is told at the door by the vicar's child, that her daddy has been offered a large, wealthy parish in Mayfair and that he is in church praying for guidance as to whether or not he should accept the offer and that her mummy is upstairs packing.

It's a story to reminds us of how ill advised it is to claim that anything we do is God's will. Human motives are mixed, tangled and complicated. In church circles too many folk claim God's will to be what is all too obviously their own will. It's far wiser, in decision making, to weigh up rights and wrongs as dispassionately as possible and then to do what appears to be right, but always allowing for the possibility that we're mistaken and that God's will has not been done.

The will of God

I like to think that it was God's will that I became a priest. When the idea first occurred to me I was not at all certain and laid no claim to it being so. I subjected the possibility first to the scrutiny of my father, then to my bishop, then to a group of both clergy and laity at a selection conference in Woking, then to the staff of a theological college in South Africa and so on. They all agreed that it appeared to be God's will and so I was deaconed and then priested, but was it?

Perhaps. I still refuse to be certain. God's will is fluid, in flux, a process, not something determined, fixed, ready made and merely awaiting discovery. It is always in the making and in co-operation with us. Any decision we make, be it right or wrong, can be made or turned into God's will, hand in hand with him. Thus even the crucifixion of a perfectly innocent man, surely not the will of God (as Jesus' hesitation in Gethsemane bears witness), can be made into God's will, if accepted in the love and forgiveness and power of God (as Jesus' acceptance in Gethsemane bears witness).

Frightening certainties

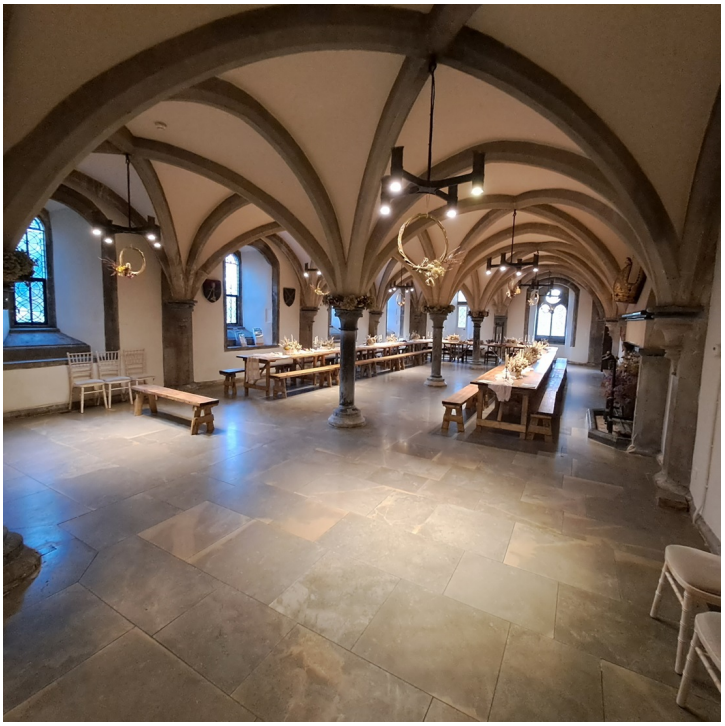
To understand the will of God as being something like this, allows and helps us to question and challenge the frightening certainties of some manifestations of fanatical Christianity which, now and then, rear their heads to disturb us.

To understand the will of God as being something like this, allows and helps us to question and challenge the confident claims that it is indubitably God's will that a person manifestly unsuitable is called to some vital ministry or vocation, or that it is indubitably God's will to break up a family for the sake of a mere love affair.

To understand the will of God as being something like this, helps demonstrate the absurdity of claiming God's will for the victory of one side exclusively in bitter argument or in warfare.

Divine oversight

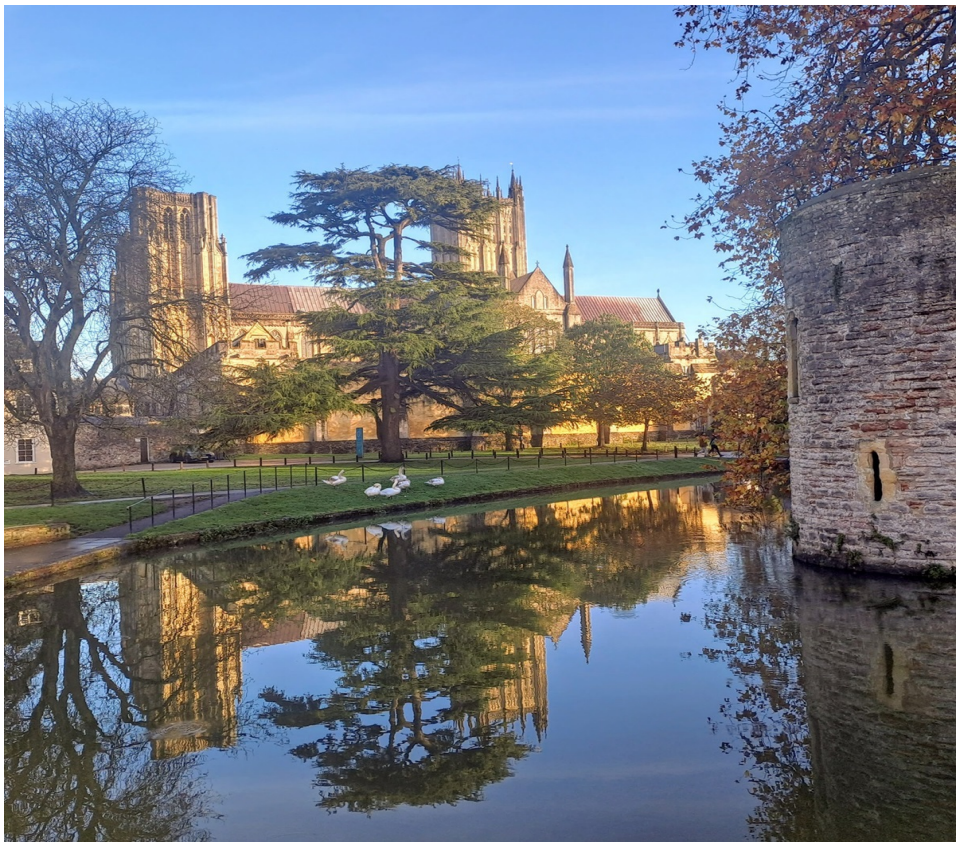
One of the crazy deans I worked for in Africa always referred to his bishop as "Paul, by divine oversight, Bishop of Mashonaland." A harmless enough joke so long as it remains a joke. In reality God looks over and oversees everything and everyone. In reality God helps align to his will the actions of anyone humble enough not to claim to be privy to it.



Banqueting Hall,
Bishop's Palace, Wells

(524) "This and That" - 19 November 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



The doorbell we've installed here in Wells loves the sound of its own voice. It's a coarse, loud, unmellifluous rendition of the Westminster Chime, deliberately calibrated to be heard at the bottom of our small garden.

To love the sound of one's voice is a not uncommon and deplorable clerical affliction. The dean of Rhodesia's Salisbury Cathedral in the nineteen seventies, when I was his assistant priest there, certainly loved the sound of his own coarse and loud voice. He preached too often for too long and deliberately neglected to switch off his microphone when singing the hymns, his booming ego drowning and annoying a fine choir.

Reigniting the wars of the Reformation

These days the doorbell of our quirky, city centre refuge, bolthole and sanctuary of a home rarely rings and so whenever it does we are thrilled. This was not so when we lived in rectories and vicarages where doorbells ring far too frequently, as often as not during meals and sometimes in the middle of the night. In my last Australian parish, shortly before we left, I recall being ripped untimely from the womb of sleep at half past three in the morning by the doorbell's insistent and repeated ring. I opened the front door with bleary eyes in a stony face to be greeted by a yobbo who told me that he'd been sent by the Roman Catholic priest who'd assured him that I would be able to offer a little help. An unlikely story, but if true likely to have reignited the wars of the Reformation.

I asked the lad, "What sort of help do you want?" He answered, "Oh, I don't know, a drink or something." "What sort of drink?" "How about a Jamieson?" On being informed that only coffee was available, he slouched off in disgust. I couldn't get to sleep again and so was able to tackle a great backlog of work in my study. Later, in the afternoon, while visiting an elderly lady, she looked at me and said, "You're going to sleep!" I was.

Insomnia

I don't require great slabs of sleep each night. Even in retirement I rise in time to listen to the 5.00am news. It's a blessed and leisurely time that begins with a coffee, shave and scalding shower followed by a session behind the landing's balustrade at my desk, where I send off a daily poem to a circle of like-minded poetasters, write up my journal, empty my email inbox and fiddle and phaff over these weekly articles to the accompaniment of eighteenth century music. I'm glad to be no true insomniac, should something prey upon my mind, the Kindle app on my phone, which I keep next to the bed, enables me to read myself back to sleep after a couple of paragraphs.

Whenever called upon to bless someone's house I like to use a little rite that I have put together myself. When it is the turn of the bedrooms to be holy smoked, holy water sprinkled and prayed over, I recite a short passage of scripture and then follow it with this lovely stanza from Samuel Tayoor Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner:*

Oh sleep! It is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.

Upon thy bed reclining

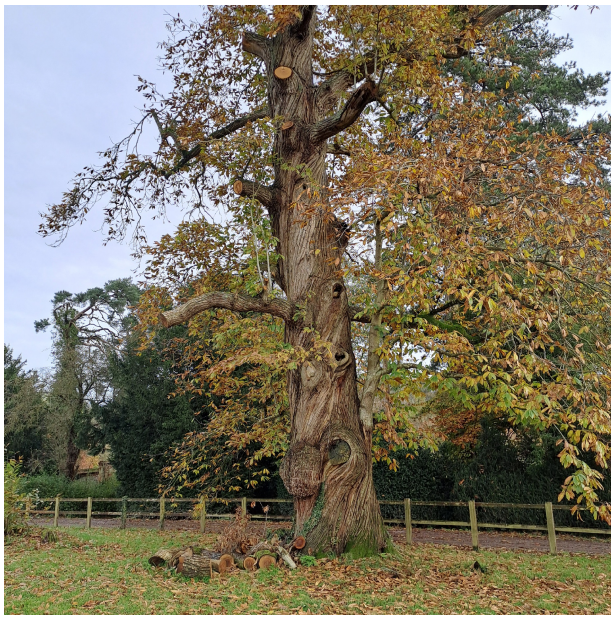
The Dean who loved the sound of his own voice was a true insomniac. He would wake in the middle of the night, tortured by mental demons which he could put to flight only by getting up to bake bread, or going to the casualty wing of the vast city hospital to assist, or hinder, the professionals in their noble work.

To all genuine insomniacs I commend Prudentius' lovely Compline hymn: *Servant of God, remember*.... Its second and third verses go:

When kindly slumber calls thee,
Upon thy bed reclining,
Trace thou the Cross of Jesus,
Thy heart and forehead signing.

The cross dissolves the darkness,
and drives away temptation;
It calms the wavering spirit
By quiet consecration....

Prudentius



Tortured old age

The long, dark, fourth century nights of Prudentius' time, held far greater fears and terrors than those of twenty first century Somerset. His hymn, all eight verses of it, makes a comforting prayer. It is also set to a lovely tune which means that the mental demons of the night can be hummed or sung away.

When I was a little boy my mother advised me to recite the Lord's Prayer if ever I saw a ghost, whereupon the ghost would flee, terrified. Several times I put her advice to the test and she was right, ghosts did indeed reveal themselves to be the illusions they surely are, and fear evaporated. To take Prudentius' advice and trace the Cross of Jesus on the forehead and heart would surely be as effective. Prudentius was born in the year 348 in Spain. He was a lawyer who made a successful career for himself in civil administration. On retiring he occupied himself with devotional exercises and Christian writing. There is a fragment of his verse in Helen Waddel's *The Wandering Scholars* that I've used devotionally for years. It is lovely to recite after coming through a troubled time, or having been assured of absolution and the world takes on a wholly different aspect:

ABeautiful Dawn
After Bad Weather

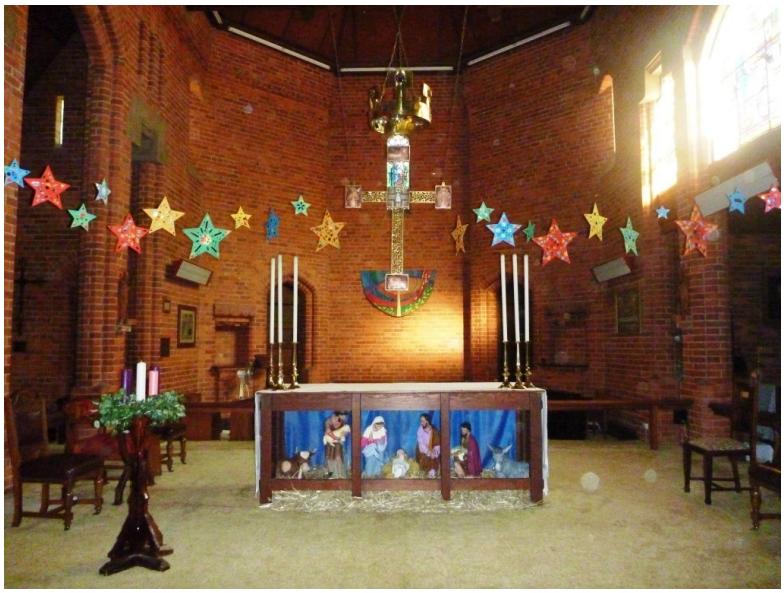
O Night and Dark,
O huddled sullen clouds,
Light enters in: the sky whitens.
Christ comes! Depart! Depart!

The mist sheers apart
Cleft by the sun's spear.
Colour comes back to things
From his bright face.

(523) "This and That" - 12 November 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

To be asked to hear the confession of a churchgoer is a rare occurrence for Anglican priests these days. To be asked to hear the confession of a Muslim is unimaginable, unheard of and unthinkable. Yet once upon a time it happened to me.



St Augustine's Shepparton, set up for Christmas

Safe in Dubai

Before crossing the world to take on the priestly care of St John the Baptist's Church at Boldre, in the New Forest, I was the Rector of St Augustine's Church at Shepparton, in Australia. I loved its parish church; outside, in bright sunshine a warmly orange, unglazed-brick building set in a well tended, well treed and beautiful garden. Inside it was darkly mysterious, altogether 'other' and quietly awe inspiring. One afternoon, in 2007, I was sitting in the Rector's stall of its icon glittering, stained glass tinted, lady chapel, saying Evensong with a colleague, when two teenage girls entered hesitantly and sat down.

Afterwards, in conversation with them, I learned that they were in a 'safe house' from which they were unwise to have ventured, for fear of being spotted by friends of their vengeful father in Melbourne. He was on the lookout for them, determined to prevent them from joining their mother who had fled him in order to settle in Dubai. They told me how attractive they found St Augustine's church and that they were curious about, and sympathetic to the Christian faith, in part because they had things on their conscience and were in need of reassurance and to make the acquaintance of an all forgiving God of love and mercy, rather than one of implacable justice and retribution.

Over the next few weeks my wife and I got to know them both and eventually were asked to share dinner with their minders and selves at the safe house. They also asked to make their confession and duly did so. Shortly thereafter they disappeared and it was only some months later that a card informed us that they had made it safely to Dubai. Several years later one of them turned up at our rectory to say thank you in person.

Auricular confession

Auricular confession, literally: *confession to the ear*, is confessing one's sins to God in the presence of a priest authorized to forgive them in his name. It's a practice too easily abused by untrustworthy or stupid priests and so is not often asked for by mainstream Anglicans. Yet all of us have done wrong, have said and done things we dearly regret, sometimes grievous enough for us to imagine forgiveness to be impossible. An intermediary ear might sometimes be advisable, be it of a priest, dear friend or professional counsellor. Our Anglican Church's position on auricular confession is wisely summed up in the phrase: *all may, none must, some should*.

Felix culpa

Most wrongdoings that trouble our conscience seriously enough to cloud our contentment with bouts of regret are footling, are mere peccadilloes. A wise friend, a counsellor, a priest or even our own common sense can soon put them in perspective and assure us of absolution. Not all though. There are at least one or two wrongs or mistakes, in most lives, that continue to haunt and trouble us, and rightly so. Unless a faith has an answer to these, it is sadly wanting. The Christian faith does.

In the great Easter Vigil Proclamation called *The Exultet,* there occurs a startling phrase: ...*O felix culpa quae talem et tantum meruit habere redemptorem*, "O happy fault (or fall) that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer." It's a phrase that was amplified by Saint Ambrose in the 4th century, he tells us how fortunate the ruin of Adam in the Garden of Eden was, because his sin brought

more good to humankind than would have been the case had he stayed perfectly innocent. Milton too, in Paradise Lost, puts the same point into the mouth of Adam.

It's a notion that lies at the very heart of our faith and also of what is arguably the most impressive of all virtues, namely, forgiveness. Light from darkness, good from evil, life from death.

Forgiveness

To forgive is counter intuitive, goes against the grain, defies common sense, is outside the square, unpredictable, disrupts the inexorability of cause and effect, thwarts the inevitable. Essentially, and usually at great personal cost, it accepts, yes accepts a wrong inflicted upon the self, an injury, a hurt, an evil, and then, instead of resenting it or railing against it, purposely, deliberately and intentionally begins to use it as the framework upon which to build a new good. So that, if and when that good is achieved, even the guilty party can say *O felix culpa* (O happy fault or fall).....

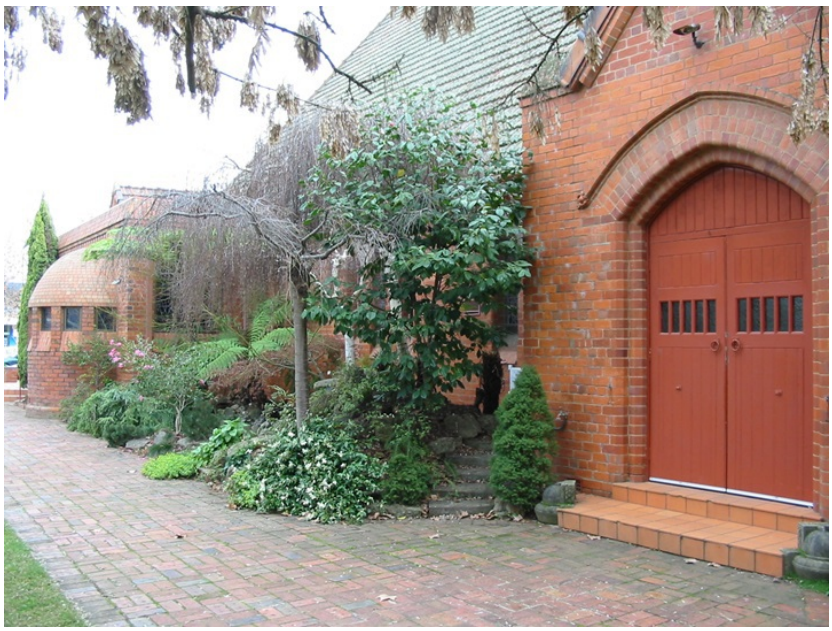
Those of us, be it by widowhood or divorce, who have been happily and successfully remarried, experience something like it. Out of the evil and sadness of a premature death, or the hurt, misery and unhappiness of a divorce has been built a great good that is deeply indebted to and built upon the sadness of a previous relationship's end. *O felix culpa* (O happy fall).

There's a sonnet by Robert Frost that is subtly suggestive of all of this. In the USA, autumn is the Fall. Apples recall the Garden of Eden....

Unharvested

A scent of ripeness from over a wall.
And come to leave the routine road
And look for what had made me stall,
There sure enough was an apple tree
That had eased itself of its summer load,
And of all but its trivial foliage free,
Now breathed as light as a lady's fan.
For there had been an apple fall
As complete as the apple had given man.
The ground was one circle of solid red.

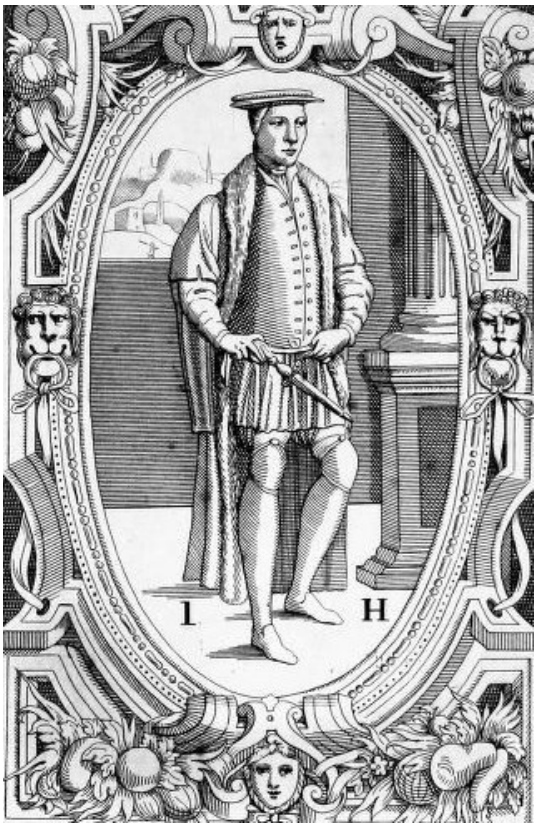
May something go always unharvested!
May much stay out of our stated plan,
Apples or something forgotten and left,
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.



St Augustine's Church,
Shepparton, Australia.
(South side)

(522) "This and That" - 5 November 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



John Heywood (1497–1580)

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks," but you can. John Donne the dazzling poet and passionate lover, who ended up as Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, had a talented old grandfather called John Heywood (1497–1580) who, both as a young dog and an old one, was always up to new tricks.

Saved by mirth

He was a successful playwright, actor, poet, composer, singer, a player of the virginals, a collector of proverbs and favourite of Henry VIII. He remained a devout Catholic in dangerous times and flourished at the royal court, not only of Henry VIII, but also of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I. Eventually, though, he did have to flee to Antwerp to die in exile and once, under Henry, he only narrowly escaped being executed for plotting against Archbishop Cranmer. He was notable for wit, sociability and playfulness and so, as Sit John Harington observed, "escaped hanging with his mirth".

In 1546 Heywood published a collection of proverbs and epigrams, among them: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." One of his poems delights Diana and me for extolling the virtues of a quiet, next door neighbour, similar to ours here in this medieval city of Wells. In perfect amiability we live so closely cheek by jowl with our neighbours as to share, with one of them, small areas of floor and ceiling space in what's known as "flying freehold". Part of one of their bedrooms, for example, creeps three feet over our sitting room and so on. Here is the major portion of a lovely poem:

A Quiet Neighbour

.....we two having ten whole years
Dwelt wall to wall, so joiningly,
That whispering soundeth through well-nigh,
I never heard thy servants brawl
More than thou hadst had none at all.
Nor I can no way make avaunt
That ever I heard thee give them taunt.
Thou are to them and they to thee
More mild than mute – mum ye be.
I hear no noise mine ease to break,
Thy butt'ry door I hear not creak.
Thy kitchen cumbreth not by heat,
Thy cooks chop neither herbs nor meat.
I never heard thy fire once spark,
I never heard thy dog once bark.
I never heard once in thy house
So much as one peep of one mouse.
I never heard thy cat once mew.
These praises are not small nor few.....
Of all thy guests set at thy board
I never heard one speak one word.
I never heard them cough nor hem.
I think thence to Jerusalem,
For this neighbourly quietness
Thou art the neighbour neighbourless.....

avaunt: boast, **butt'ry:** buttery, room for storing wines and food,
cumbreth: inconvenience, **hem:** clear the throat.

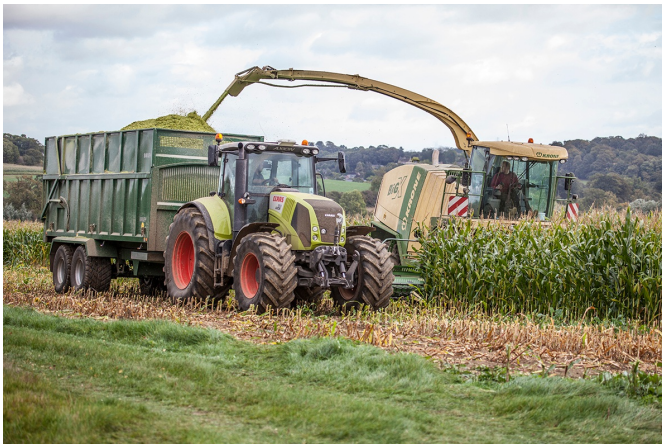
A new trick for an old dog

We have been adding a new lease of life to the door of the stone shed at the bottom of our tiny, pampered and dearly loved garden. To do so required this old dog to learn a new trick or two because, attached to the bottom of the door, was the rusted relic of an old tee-hinge, its screws so thoroughly rusted-in as to be impossible to remove with a screwdriver. Undaunted, I popped a mere couple of hundred yards across the all but adjacent town car park, to buy a titanium bit for our electric drill from an old-fashioned hardware store. On my return I so successfully drilled into each screw's head as to decapitate each one, leaving enough shaft to twist out with a vice grip. On occasions old dogs can learn new tricks. Proverbial wisdom is as often wrong as right.

Scrumping

For the past month or two our daily walk has taken us alongside a couple of fields with impressive stands of maize. Last week the last of these was reaped, but we were still able to scrump, for lunch, a pair of fine, plump cobs that had escaped the reaper.

The first scrumping expedition I remember occurred when I was a pupil at Guinea Fowl Boys High School, in Rhodesia. In the middle of the night, with empty pillow cases for sacks, a group of us raided the apricot trees in a local farmer's orchard. Daylight revealed the bulk of our booty, tipped into a bath for examination and distribution, to have been far from scrumptious scrumping. Most of the fruit was hard, green and barely edible.



Reaping green maize

The scrumped maize cobs from our walk last week were almost as disappointing. Unsheathed, they appeared beautifully appetizing: gleaming gold and tightly kerneled in spiralled, rather than straight, lines from top to bottom. Boiled, buttered and salted they proved too tough to be entirely satisfactory and far from sweet. What is more, the cob's core had a disturbing, episcopal purple colour to it. Undeterred, we ate up all those tough little kernels and felt heavily-fed all afternoon for having down so.

In the Rhodesia of my youth maize was harvested dry for the kernels to be milled. In England most appears to be grown for silage to feed cattle, or for anaerobic digesters to fuel vehicles. Our two scrumped cobs fuelled us sluggishly.

Recreational heresies

Scrumping is stealing. We are violators of the eighth commandment and not of that one alone, we confess. Is this likely to elicit Divine wrath? Will it call down upon us
Divine punishment?

One of the great theological liberations in my Christian journey was to discover and then appropriate, unpack and make some sort of sense of the aphorism: *We are not punished for our sins, but by them*.

Much of the traditional language and imagery to do with Divine wrath and punishment and with Divine reward and favour, is the result of misattributing to God the consequences of our actions, be they good or evil. It is an understandable error, but a serious mistake. God is love. Redemption is sheer grace. The impulse to worship is gratitude not fear of punishment or hope of reward. *We are not punished for our sins, but by them. We are not rewarded for our virtues, but by them.* The traditional, often lurid and nasty notions of retribution, everlasting punishment and torture in hell, rest on shonky foundations. So too does heaven as "reward", which is, and has to be, unmerited gift.

Does this make me a heretic? Of course not, though who cares? Freedom to flirt with heresy is, for a present-day Church of England believer, joy and recreation. One of my all time favourite verses is a six stanza epitaph on himself by John Heath Stubbs, here are its fourth and sixth stanzas:

Orthodox in beliefs as following the English Church
Barring some heresies he would have for recreation
Yet too often left these sound principles (as I am told) in the lurch
Being troubled with idleness, lechery, pride and dissipation.

Now having outlived his friends and most of his reputation
He is content to take his rest under these stones and grass
Not expecting but hoping that the Resurrection
Will not catch him unawares whenever it takes place.

(521) "This and That" - 29 October 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

It is important to be able to laugh at our own dearly held convictions and enthusiasms, if only as an antidote to fanaticism. I'm glad that I'm able to relish the absurdity as well as the truth of the faith I dearly love and firmly believe and so find funny this French limerick, which mildly takes the mickey out it:

Il y avait un jeune homme de Dijon	*There was a young fellow of Dijon*
Qui n'aimait pas la religion.	*Who took a dislike to religion.*
Il dit, "O ma foi,	*He said, "Oh my God,*
Comme drôle sont ces trios:	*These three are so odd -*
L Le Père, et le Fils, et le Pigeon."	*The Father, the Son, and the Pigeon."*

It is the word *pigeon* that makes both the original French version and its English translation funny. The scientific term for the family of birds inclusive of doves and pigeons is *Columbidae,* but as in everyday English, so also in French, there are two different, interchangeable words for the bird: in French, *colombe* and *pigeon*, in English, *dove* and *pigeon.* The word *pigeon* is faintly derogatory, and refers usually to the larger and more pestilential members of the family. The word *dove*, one of the few English words to rhyme with love, is gentler and associated with peace, well being and the Holy Spirit.

The French *pigeon* derives from the Latin *pīpiō,* for a "peeping" chick. *Dove* is Germanic in origin and refers to the bird's diving flight. A group of doves is called a "dule", from the French word *deuil* for 'mourning'. There is indeed something doleful about the crooning of doves.

A toast to God the daddy

Possibly the funniest of all poetic parodies of Christianity is by John Whitworth (1945-2019). It is called *God Squad,* here are the first 6 of 12 stanzas:

A toast to God the Daddy, a toast to God the Son,
And one more toast to God the Ghost, the Holy Three-in-one.

We are the sheep the blessed sheep the Shepherd has selected.
We walked the walk and talked the talk and got ourselves elected,

And now we stroll the holy hills, Eternity before us.
The Heavens ring as angels sing an Hallelujah chorus,

While, miles and miles below us, yawn the smoking pits of Hell
Where Satan and his horrid band in deep damnation dwell.

We are the blessed sheep, the blessed Bible-bashing winners
And Paradise is twice as nice when you can see the sinners.

My brother writhes in agony, all chopped and charred and chewed up.
It serves him right, the little shite. He had his chance and screwed up.....

A worthwhile donation to the Cathedral

A week ago we visited the first 21 miles of the 630 mile South West Coast Path, that begins at Minehead, as the support team for 2 walkers, Diana's son Pula and his daughter Zoe. We dropped them in rain and a bitter wind at Minehead, did some local exploring, goggling at one of the only 3 remaining Butlins resorts in Britain and then met up with them for a sandwich lunch at Porlock Weir, as the weather cleared. They then walked on and we, after more exploring, parked our car at St John's Church, outside Lynton, and walked to meet them along the path overlooking the Bristol Channel to Wales, which was bathed in late sunshine as dusk fell over our own, north facing Devon cliffs.

Between Minehead and Porlock we diverted to Selworthy, a tiny village of thatched-roofed cottages, and took refuge from the rain in its 14th and 15th century, lime-white-washed All Saints' Church. The pillars inside are notably slender and the pulpit features a purportedly accurate 17thcentury hourglass. I would like to donate just such an accurate glass to Wells Cathedral pulpit, but only of seven minutes duration. The porch of Sellworthy church is one of few with a small room above it called a *parvise*. A stairwell in the nave grants access to the room which has an oriel type balcony protruding from the wall, like a private box in an opera house. In 1804 the room had been remodelled

as the family pew for the lords of the manor. Higher than the pulpit, it enabled them to look down upon their mere priest with gracious condescension.

The village of Porlock is lovely and its name resonates with anyone who loves the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his wondrous poem, *Kubla Khan.* Coleridge claimed to have perceived the whole poem, from beginning to end, in a dream. On waking, while transcribing it in a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Lynton, he was disturbed by a knock on the door from "a person from Porlock". After an hour's conversation the dream had gone, so the poem remains a mere 54 line fragment and the phrase, "a person from Pollock", or just the name "Pollock", has become a widely recognised literary allusion to any unwanted or unexpected disputer of artistic creativity.

Skipton and Ararat

I visited New Zealand last week and also Ararat in Australia, a pleasing town on the Great Divide, in Victoria, where I was Rector from 1991-96. A parishioner from that parish, now resident in Tauranga, New Zealand, is on his death bed and his children, old school friends of my own children, emailed me to have a chat with him on Skype, which I duly did. At the end I asked his son to lay his hands on his dad's head as I recited a blessing. Sweet Christianity, what hope and consolation it grants to human existence.

A priest never leaves a parish fully behind. Ararat was my 2nd second Australian parish. A month ago the daughter of a remarkable parishioner from my first, the village of Skipton, near Ballarat, asked me to phone her dying father. This too, I did, for a good and humourous reminisce. He has now died, may he rest in peace. Here are 14 of 20 stanzas I wrote for and recited at his 70th birthday party in 1998:

Light Lines on George Lines, for his 70th Birthday

George, a deep yet funny man
Has reached mankind's allotted span,
Achieved the years assigned to men,
The psalmist's three score years and ten,

Which surely is the best of times
To sing his praise in measured rhymes.
Why wait until a good man dies
To honour, praise and eulogise?

For thirteen years I've known the man,
Have grown to be his friend and fan,
Relishing his conversation,
Learning, wit and cerebration.

Both man of God and man of science,
He holds together, in defiance,
Strange paradoxes of a kind
That puzzle those of simpler mind.

He's wise, he's daft, he's strong, he's frail,
Well esteemed, beyond the pale,
His head's in clouds, his feet on ground
He's madly sane, insanely sound.

Of all Australians that I've met
On none like him my eyes I've set.
Distinguished looking, twinkling eyed,
His sympathies and interests wide.

Full of facts most recondite,
In conversation a delight,
His wicked tongue controlled in part,
By Robyn and his Christian heart.

He first to my attention drew
As sermon fodder in a pew,
Where, if my sermon proved a dud,
He'd ruminate his own good cud.

Then after church and over sherry,
In the hall and waxing merry,
Sizzling, witty jokes he'd trade
Imported east from Adelaide.

His mind, so crammed with information,
Eased my children's education.
When stumped by queries we would sing,
"Don't ask us, give George a ring".

Unlike so many of his peers,
This man of action and ideas
Timidity repudiates,
He'll risk a risk, and tempt the fates.

And so he's made some bold decisions,
Has dreamed his dreams and seen his visions.
His few mistakes we don't despise,
With pride can George eat humble pies.

For this I love this man of men
Who's three score years now, and ten.
So generous, kind, devoid of rancour,
His wife and Faith his strength and anchor.

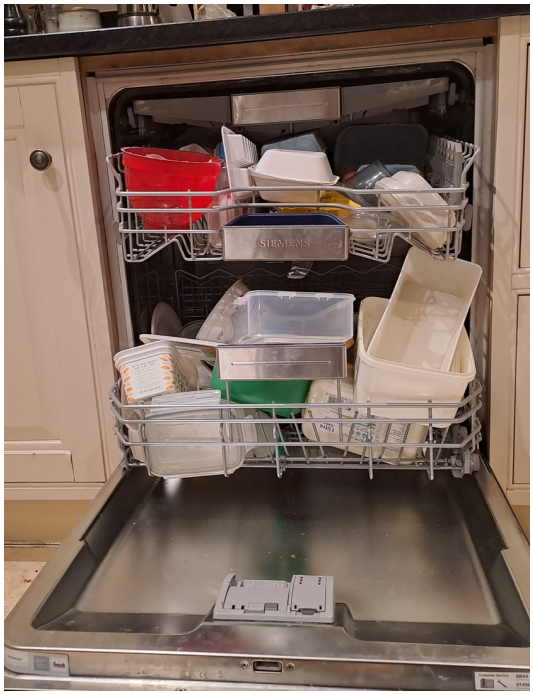
May he with learning, zest and dash
Long continue with panache
To bless our lives for years galore
Till called at last through heaven's door.

(520) “This and That” - 22 October 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

To protect delicate china from clumsy servants, the first dishwashers were invented in the middle of the nineteenth century, they were clumsy, mechanical, hand-operated devices. It wasn’t until 1929 that Europe’s first electric-motor driven dishwashers were invented and manufactured. They began to sell widely, to the wealthy, during the postwar boom of the 1950s. Today about 50% of households in Britain and 75% in America have one.

Rolled up sleeves



We keep eggs in our dishwasher, on the top tray in the back right hand corner. The rest of the machine is filled with a jumble of empty, mostly plastic containers which, because one day they might just prove useful, Diana is reluctant to throw away. Another of her quirks is a love of washing-up by hand, but only so long as there’s a window to gaze through while she does so. There is just such a window in our kitchen here in Wells, so the dishes are washed contentedly. There is conclusive statistical evidence that modern dishwashers are more water and e6nergy efficient than washing up-by hand, but that is not so in our house. No electronic machine can come near to matching the economy-of-energy and efficiency employed by Diana with her sleeves rolled up.

Washing, drying or putting away

My parents departed Britain for outlandish places in the early 1950s and so there was never an electric dishwasher in the homes of my youth. As often as not the job fell upon my brother, sister and me, a task conveniently divided into three, the washer, the dryer and the put-a-wayer. We argued long and hard as to who did what, the most favoured task being the washing: always the glassware first, then the cutlery, then the crockery and finally the pans. The least favoured task was the drying.

There can be joy in most tasks if they are willingly and imaginatively undertaken. The poet Susan Meyers 1945-2017, seems to have had a mother similar to Diana:

Mother, Washing Dishes

She rarely made us do it—
we’d clear the table instead—so my sister and I teased
that some day we’d train our children right
and not end up like her, after every meal stuck
with red knuckles, a bleached rag to wipe and wring.
The one chore she spared us: gummy plates
in water greasy and swirling with sloughed peas,
globs of egg and gravy.

Or did she guard her place
at the window? Not wanting to give up the gloss
of the magnolia, the school traffic humming.
Sunset, finches at the feeder. First sightings
of the mail truck at the curb, just after noon,
delivering a note, a card, the least bit of news.

46 million billion waltzes

There are millions of little waltzes, attributed to Mozart, yet to be heard by anyone, let alone recorded. In his *Musikalisches Würfelspiel* (*Musical Dice Game*) he provides us with 176 bars of

music arranged in 16 groups of 11 bars each. From each of the sixteen groups we are invited to choose one of the 11 bars, by rolling dice, until we have a pretty little 16 bar waltz. There are 46 million billion possible combinations, so every time the dice are rolled to construct yet another and different sequence of bars, there's always a new waltz, one almost certain never to have been seen or performed before. If we can play the piano there's an endless supply of Mozart world premieres at our very own finger tips.

The earliest surviving example of these 18th century, musical dice games is one devised by the composer Johann Kirnberger and called: *The Ever-Ready Minuet and Polonaise Composer.* Bach's son Carl Phillip Emmanuel has left us one too: *A method for making six bars of double counterpoint at the octave without knowing the rules.* Anyone interested in these remarkable games should copy the words: *"Musikalisches Würfelspiel"* into Google to be directed to YouTube clips that explain how the games work and also offer examples of minuets to listen to.

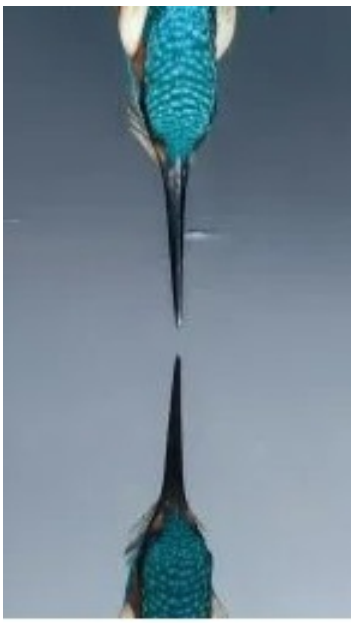
Loaded dice

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther was outraged by the selling of expensive certificates called Indulgences. They declared release from time in purgatory for those who bought them, or for their nominated loved ones. His outrage helped spark the Reformation. Avarice is to be found everywhere though, not only in the Church. Buddhism, for example, is not immune. Tibetans, anxious as to what they were to be reborn as after reincarnation, would go to a temple to find out, where dice and a board were put to use to enlighten them. Laurence Waddell, a Victorian scholar of Buddhism, discovered that the dice used in such divinations were loaded to foretell an unfavourable outcome so as to induce enquirers to pay for expensive rites to counteract an undesirable fate.

Crooked, gaffed or loaded dice have been found in the tombs of ancient Egypt, in not a few prehistoric graves of North and South America and in Viking graves. To gamblers loaded dice are known as tappers, missouts, passers, floppers, cappers, or spot loaders, depending on how and where extra weight has been applied. Although dice may prove to be perfect cubes, when carefully measured, extra weight, just below the surface on some sides, makes the opposite sides come up more often than they should. While such loaded dice don't always fall with the intended side up, they do so often enough to guarantee that a cheater wins the majority of his bets.

Kingfishers catch fire as dragonflies draw flame

It is lovely to say one's prayers in a beautiful spot, as we do each morning in the beautiful Lady Chapel of the Cathedral, before the beginning of the morning liturgy or in its Choir's stalls before Choral Evensong begins. Expectant prayers of the sort so beautifully described bt Ann Lewin:



Prayer Is Like Watching for the Kingfisher

Prayer is like watching for
The kingfisher. All you can do is
Be there where he is like to appear, and
Wait.
Often nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible signs, only the
Knowledge that he's been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.

(519) “This and That” - 15 October 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

At a local market two weeks ago, for a mere £4, we bought a tray of 52 large berries called alligator pears (*persea americana),* otherwise known as avocados. They were the dark, warty-skinned, Hass variety and we were well aware that, at such a price, they were unlikely to be perfect. No matter, since then we’ve been enjoying refreshingly cold, limey, garlicky, avocado soup; lemony, walnutty, avocado pesto; idiosyncratic guacamole and more. Kitchen blenders, like Christianity, have a way of dealing with and bringing good out of imperfection.

Cucumber soup and over ripe bananas

Those brought up and used to living in isolated places find buying in bulk difficult to resist. Both Diana and I begin to drool and go weak at the knees when presented with trays of sweet potatoes, or tomatoes, or aubergines at bargain prices. We bought a tray of each of these, as well as of the aforementioned avocados, a fortnight ago. It was three and a half years on Tristan da Cunha, eight years in the Rhodesian bush and two and a half years on the Island of St Helena that turned my father and then me into compulsive bulk-buyers. It was three years in Lesotho and five and a half years on St Helena that did likewise for Diana. My father once presented my mother with a sack of cucumbers after a visit to the vegetable market in Salisbury, Rhodesia. The result was a delicious, creamy cucumber soup that became a rectory staple for weeks. On the island of Tristan da Cunha a crate of bananas ordered from Cape Town and of necessity transported by ship, arrived totally black not yellow. We nonetheless gobbled the lot, but it has left me with a distaste for overripe bananas that I still have.

Avocados have an important quality that makes them a farmer’s dream. They can be picked when hard and unripe and so are easy to transport. Plants with fruit that continue to ripen, even when detached from their mother plant, are called *climacteric,* they are more prolific in the production of a gaseous plant hormone called *ethylene,* important for its role in inducing the ripening process. Notable *climacteric* fruits are apples, bananas, mangos, pears, apricots, peaches, plums, avocados, guavas, nectarines, passion fruit, blueberries and cantaloupes. *Non-climacteric* fruits include: citrus fruits such as oranges, grapefruit and lemon, berries such as raspberries, strawberries and cherries, grapes, pineapples, melons (including watermelons) and pomegranates. As many a wise home cook well knows, the ripening process of *climacteric* fruits can be speeded up by placing them in a brown paper bag to concentrate the *ethylene.*

Gomphotheres and giant ground sloths

Two of the houses I’ve lived in have had avocado trees in the garden. The first was my father’s rectory in Harare, a tree which, for many years, produced no fruit at all until we were persuaded, against our better judgement, to apply a local, silly, superstitious remedy for infertility. We hammered some rusty nails into its trunk whereupon, the following season, it began to fruit. There was also a tree in my rectory garden in Wodonga, Australia. It was not the most robust of examples and during the nine years I was there I recall it producing only three fruit. Avocado trees are medium-sized evergreens that belong to the laurel family and were first domesticated over 5000 years ago in central America. Mexico remains the world's leading producer, supplying around 35% of the global harvest.

Interestingly the trees are the result of what is known as *coevolution*. Their success as a plant being the result of favourable selection, thanks to their coevolution with plant-eating megafauna, creatures large enough to consume and excrete their large, slightly toxic seeds. Among the biggest of extinct fruit-eating mammals in the American tropics was a sort of early elephant known as a *gomphothere.* Aided and abetted by *giant ground sloths* they gobbled down wild avocados and their seeds, helping to disseminate them. On the extinction of such megafauna it was probably humans,

migrating into growing regions, who became the primary long-distance dispersers of the fruit, not least and ultimately, by domesticating them.

A whopper

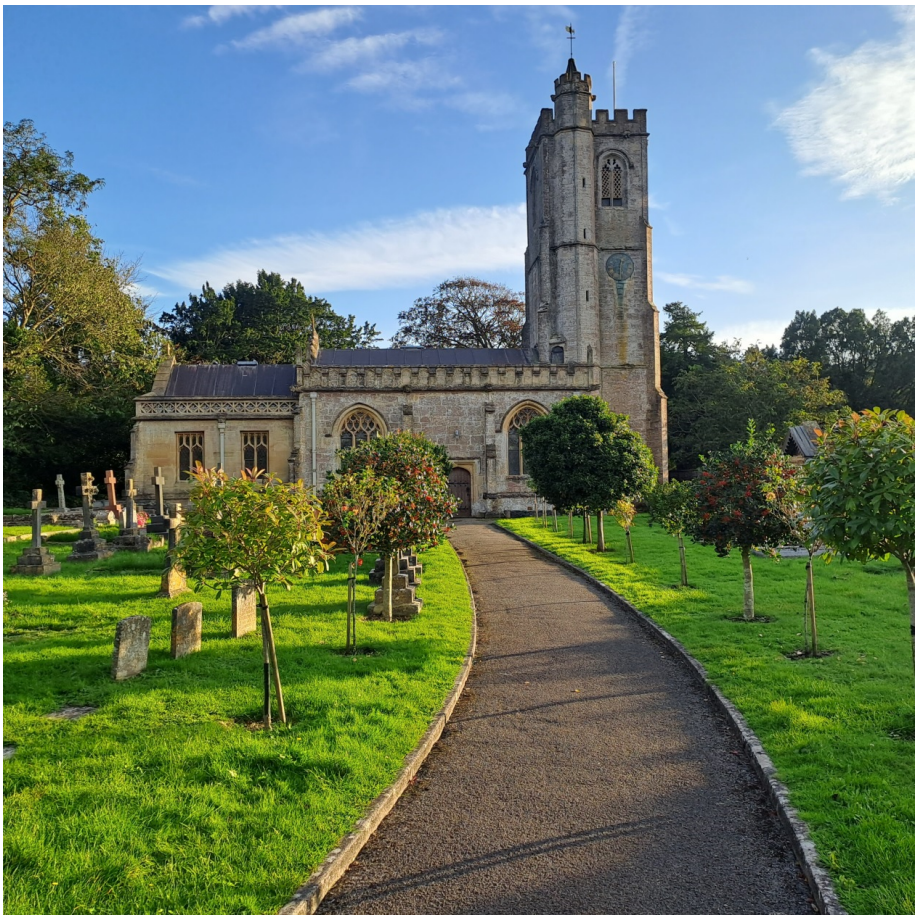
Diana and I visited Zimbabwe in 2013 and on our way to spend a few days in a self-catering chalet at Inyanga, blew a tyre on our car and had to stop to buy a new one in Rusape. There, in a supermarket more notable for empty shelves than full ones, we attempted to buy sufficient food to keep us going. Later, we bought, from a roadside peasant farmer, an avocado easily as big as my head. By the time we had finished eating its far more yellow than green flesh, we began to wonder if we liked avocados at all. There are over 400 varieties though, and the small Hass are far and away the most favoured and best flavoured.

Avocados are criticized for containing saturated fat, which they do, but the fruit is also high in fibre, contains more potassium than do bananas and is full of foliates and vitamin E. Of all fruits it is the highest in protein and its natural oils are good for the skin.

Replacing elms and willows

We have celebrated the harvest twice this year. First in the Cathedral, nowhere near as robustly and colourfully as we did in St John's Boldres, it was a muted affair, nor did we sing "We Plough the Fields and Scatter" to my disappointment. The second time was at a West Horrington School Assembly, more colourfully than at the Cathedral, but again without "We Plough the Fields and Scatter". I wonder if the hymn is in the process of being cancelled. On reading through the words I can see nothing to merit that dread fate. Even if we don't plough the fields as much as we used to, there are still many in Somerset that are indeed beautifully and neatly ploughed and even if we no longer scatter the good seed on the ground, but drill them instead, early morning sessions listening to Farming Today inform me that drones are beginning to be used to plant canola seeds, and that, surely, is a form of scattering.

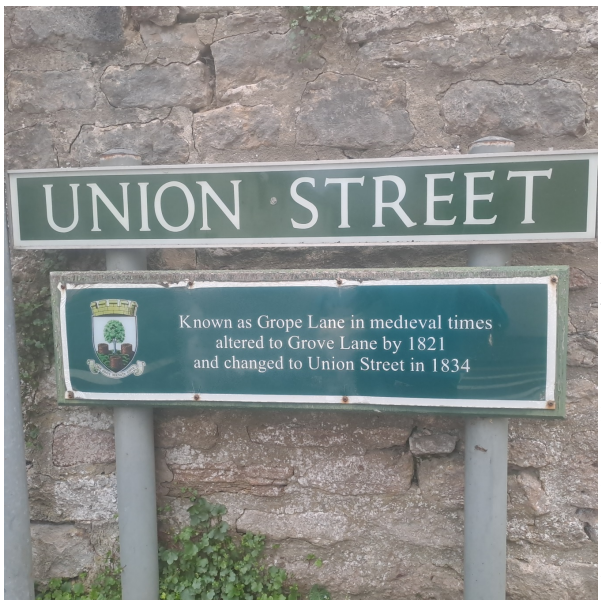
The current enthusiasm for rewilding and the purported possibilities offered by DNA to bring back into being what is now extinct, with the help of a warming world climate, might mean that *gomphotheres* and *giant ground sloths* will again roam our world to raid vegetable stalls for avocados, excrete the seeds and so replace our long gone elms and soon to be gone willows with avocado trees.



St Michael & All Angels, Dinder

(518) "This and That" - 8 October 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



In Medieval Times, *Union Street,* where Diana and I now live in Wells, was named *Grope Lane.* This medieval relic of a street moniker has even more explicitly crude versions in the records of a number of towns and cities in England. For us it means that we are now the proud and happy owners of a residence with murky moral origins, situated in what was once, more than likely, a street of brothels. For some perverse and difficult to comprehend reason this pleases me.

She Was A Rum One

A few doors down from our residence is *The Sun Inn*, now a respectable, well patronised and highly commended Greek Taverna. Every time I look up at it's sign, it brings to mind the sixties pop song that I so loved all those years ago and still do, *The House of the Rising Sun,* as sung by "The Animals". This is not an original pop song though, it's an old folk song, first collected in Appalachia in the 1930s, but with likely roots in traditional English folk songs. *Rising Sun* is the name of a bawdy house in two traditional English songs, and of a fair few English pubs too, one of them in Lacock, the village where I popped the question to Diana thirteen years ago. There is a traditional English song called *She was a Rum One* that has two possible opening verses, one of them beginning:

If you go to Lowestoft, and ask for The Rising Sun,
There you'll find two old whores and my old woman is one.

Vaughan Williams

Many good pop songs were originally folk songs: Trini Lopez's *If I Had a Hammer,* The Beach Boys' *Sloop John B*, The Tokens' *Wimoweh*, The Highwaymen's *The Gypsy Rover*, Terry Jacks' *Seasons in the Sun*, and so on, I loved them all on their release. A good melody transcends almost any treatment, and when gifted with haunting words, all the more so. Nor is it only pop singers and pop song writers who take advantage of folk songs. Many major and minor composers, down through the ages, have been inspired by them in their compositions, and used them in all sorts of other ways too. Vaughan Williams was a dedicated collector and preserver of old folk songs, some of which he used in his own compositions and others for carols and hymns. The fine tune to one of the most popular of all our hymns, *To be a Pilgrim,* was given to it by Vaughan Williams, taken from a traditional song, the first verse of which goes:

Our Captain Cried All Hands, we sail tomorrow.
Leaving us poor girls behind in grief and sorrow.
"Dry off your briny tears and cease your weeping,
It's happy we shall be at our next meeting."

Bardcore

I began to forsake pop music many years ago. Not abruptly, it was a long, long process over many years, but it all began with the kindness of a spinster missionary, of blessed memory, Miss Muriel Hook. I think of her whenever we pass the turnoff to Hook on the M3. She became a good friend of my parents when they too were missionaries in the Rhodesian bush of the mid nineteen fifties. When she went on long leave back to England for some months, she lent us her fine little gramophone and a handful of long-playing records: Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos,* Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony,* Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Music,* Handel's *Water Music* and possibly several others. There was no televison on the mission station, only crackling shortwave radio, books, board games and our own devices, but now there was music too, melodic, classical music. I was hooked by Miss Hook and slowly, slowly classical music began to displace pop music in my affections. For many years now I've not listened to pop music at all and so am totally ignorant of any releases later than *Hey Jude*, the last I remember being bowled over by.

Last week, to my surprise and delight, however, I discovered a new musical genre that is reversing this long journey away from pop music. I stumbled, by accident, upon *Bardcore* and am converted. It is a term that only came into currency two or three years ago and it refers to pop music classics reinterpreted in medieval style on medieval instruments, often with great subtlety and skill. The lyrics are adapted to be more fitting to medieval times, electronic instruments are forsaken for tabors timbrels, harps, psalteries, recorders, whistles, shawms, hurdy-gurdys and the like and the vocals are crystal clear and pure.

Unfortunately I am unfamiliar with most of the pop classics reinterpreted, because they were released long after *Hey Jude*, and so I am denied the frisson of recognition, but not quite entirely, several songs from my pop song listening era have been remade medievally. My particular heroes are a talented instrumentalist, Algal the Bard and an equally talented vocalist, Hildergard von Blingin'. They combine to give a wonderful rendition of *The House of the Rising Sun* and also of the Rolling Stones' *Paint it Black.* Here is a comparison of the lyrics of the *House of the Rising* as sung by Hildegard von Blingin' and as sung by the Animals. Hildegard adds a necessary syllable with her French pronunciation of Orléans and a *chaperon* is an elaborate medieval hat. Both versions are available on YouTube.

Hildergard	*The Animals*
There is a house in Orléans they call the Rising Sun It has been the ruin of many a soul, and Lord I know I'm one	There is a house in New Orleans They call the Rising Sun And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy And God, I know I'm one
Mother was a tailor, she sewed my chaperon My father was a gambling man, down in Orléans	My mother was a tailor She sewed my new blue jeans My father was a gamblin' man Down in New Orleans
The only thing a gambler requires is a satchel and his luck And the only time he is satisfied, is when he's in his cups.	Now the only thing a gambler needs Is a suitcase and a trunk And the only time he'll be satisfied Is when he's all drunk
O mothers tell thy children not to do as I have done I spent my life in sin and misery, in the House of the Rising Sun	Oh, mothers, tell your children Not to do what I have done Spend your lives in sin and misery In the House of the Rising Sun
I've one foot in the stirrup, and the other on the ground I shall return to Orléans, to be lost and never found	Well, I got one foot on the platform The other foot on the train I'm goin' back to New Orleans To wear that ball and chain

I love these re-makes for being so often beautifully performed and presented. They allow and encourage access to melodies, verses and sentiments I have long ignored.

They also parallel much of what my preaching, writing and priestly life have been about: reinterpreting, rethinking, re-imagining, re-presenting biblical narratives, theological truths and ancient wisdom that to so many have become stale, unbelievable or irrelevant for want of a fresh and lively remastering that releases the beautiful, life enhancing melody that is the life and death and resurrection of sweet Jesus of Nazareth.

(517) "This and That" - 1 October 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Bishops vary in quality. There have been, and indeed are a few rotters, but they are more than balanced by those who are worthy. There are even a few saintly ones, though to rise to the top of a tree usually requires qualities of an unsaintly sort. As an ordained priest I have been "pastored" by a total of twelve, which makes me something of a connoisseur. Three of the twelve I disliked and consider to have risen above their level of competence, with two of these I was in periodic conflict. The rest, except for one, were all worthy and conscientious, several delightful and a couple of them impressively godly.

My favourite bishop

In Africa, my favourite bishop was not my own, but of a neighbouring diocese who, before he was consecrated, had been a colleague, mentor and something of a friend. He is still alive, an ancient, charming, turncoat to Roman Catholicism who, bizarrely, resides in an Anglican monastery where he's permitted to celebrate the RC mass and be as witty and engaging as ever he was as the Anglican Bishop of Matabeleland. When I was appointed to my first parish he gave me some sound advice: *Never, ever criticize, demean or deprecate your predecessor, no matter how good or bad he was* (always a "he" in those days). *Instead, pay periodic tribute to him and even invite him back occasionally to preach, if you can bear to do so.* This is common sense, though often ignored, due to our own insecurities, frailties and a desire to do better and be more popular than our predecessor.

Up until last week I was a fairly distant predecessor vicar of six parishes. I am now an immediate predecessor of a seventh, because my successor at Boldre was inducted last Tuesday, we visited her at our old Vicarage last weekend, and liked her very much.

St Paul's Cathedral, St Helena.

One of my far distant predecessors, when I was Vicar of the Cathedral on the Island of St Helena, was Canon Edwin A. Barraclough. He was appointed in 1894 (87 years before me) by the second and longest ever serving Bishop of St Helena, Thomas Earle Welby, consecrated in 1867 and who died dramatically, in office, 37 years later. On 6 January 1899, aged 89, he was travelling in his carriage up the steep and winding Ladder Hill track out of Jamestown, when all of a sudden something spooked his horse, causing it to shy and take fright. The coachman jumped down in an attempt to control the animal, while Bishop Welby gamely took hold of the reins. The horse refused to be controlled, it managed to turn the carriage round and hurtle back down the steep hill. After careering 200 yards the Bishop was thrown off and instantly killed, to be buried the next day, beside his wife, in St Paul's graveyard.

Ropy clergy

During his long episcopal reign Bishop Welby employed 18 clergymen as vicars of the island's 4 parishes. Of the 18, only 2 were scoundrels, not a bad ratio, because remote island parishes are attractive refuges for ropey clerics, one of whom was Canon Barraclough. His brief CV appeared exemplary: aged 33, educated at Leeds Grammar School and All Saints College in Cambridge, ordained in 1882 and, prior to his application for an appointment on St Helena, the Vicar of All Saint's Church at West Haddon, Northamptonshire for 5 years. He was duly appointed Vicar of St Paul's Cathedral on the Island in 1894 and set about the task with vigour. He renovated the Cathedral, cleaned its walls, installed new lamps, moved the organ back to its previous position near the Chancel and conducted 141 baptisms, 27 marriages and 111 burials. Bishop Welby, impressed, appointed him a Canon in Nov 1895.

In 1896, the Bishop's wife, Mary Anne died and was buried in St Paul's graveyard, with all due honour and island-wide mourning. It left the Bishop alone and lonely and the following year he decided to arrange for his daughter Caroline and her husband, the Revd. Francis Carréthe, Vicar of Savernake in the Diocese of Salisbury, to come to St Helena. Canon Barraclough agreed to swap his

parish on the island, St Paul's, with Holy Trinity, Savernake and so sailed to England to assume his new duties.

The Bishop of Salisbury, however, had a long memory and recalled that Barraclough, when Vicar of West Haddon, was the central figure in a scandal that had blackened the reputation of the Church. A 17-year-old West Haddon villager called Fred Gammage, in late June or early July 1891, at about a quarter to eleven at night, was surprised to see his vicar walking through the darkened village carrying a churchyard ladder. Curious, Fred followed him and saw Barraclough prop the ladder against a house, climb up and enter the open bedroom window of Mrs Amy Underwood, whose husband was away in South Africa. Fred, a patient sleuth, was further able to report that Barraclough's parochial visit lasted three hours, whereupon he descended the ladder and carried it back to the churchyard. Barraclough was due to marry Miss Lucy Eagland some days later at Burley, Yorkshire and on 7 July did so, returning, to West Haddon, married, on 24 July.

Fred Gammage, obviously a tabloid journalist in the making, continued to keep a watchful eye on his Vicar and later in the same month observed Barraclough again shinning up the ladder to meet Mrs Underwood. On a subsequent occasion, fellow village witnesses even removed the Vicar's ladder, once he'd ascended it, forcing him to exit the house through the downstairs scullery. The village seethed with gossip, Barraclough's marriage ended in acrimonious divorce and all the details were fully and sensationally reported in the national and local press.

The great Australian pie

Unsurprisingly, the Bishop of Salisbury refused to appoint Barraclough to Savernake and so he returned to St Helena, intent on resuming his appointment as Vicar of the Cathedral. By this time, however, news of his lurid past had reached the island and Bishop Welby attempted to prevent his reappointment, backed by a Diocesan Court. Barraclough appealed to the Island's Supreme Court who ruled in his favour and an unedifying, lengthy wrangle ensued. There are accounts of Barraclough, robed for a service, being physically barred from his seat in the Cathedral by the churchwardens. Ultimately he was foiled and returned to England where he took up a succession of appointments to rural parishes accompanied, in at least two of them, by scandal and litigation, all of which he managed to shake off. From 1921to 1934 he was Vicar of Holy Trinity Walton, just up the road from Wells and he died as Vicar of Clevedon in 1934 aged 75.

Welby was a fine and much loved bishop, Barraclough an accomplished scoundrel of a priest. Wayward clergy are a bishop's nightmare. To patrician bishops, so too is the sort of food on offer at diocesan and parochial functions. In the Diocese of Ballarat, many years ago, I sat opposite my English born, *bon vivant* Bishop at a Bishop in Council luncheon, he had recently returned from a trip to England. I later penned the following verse:

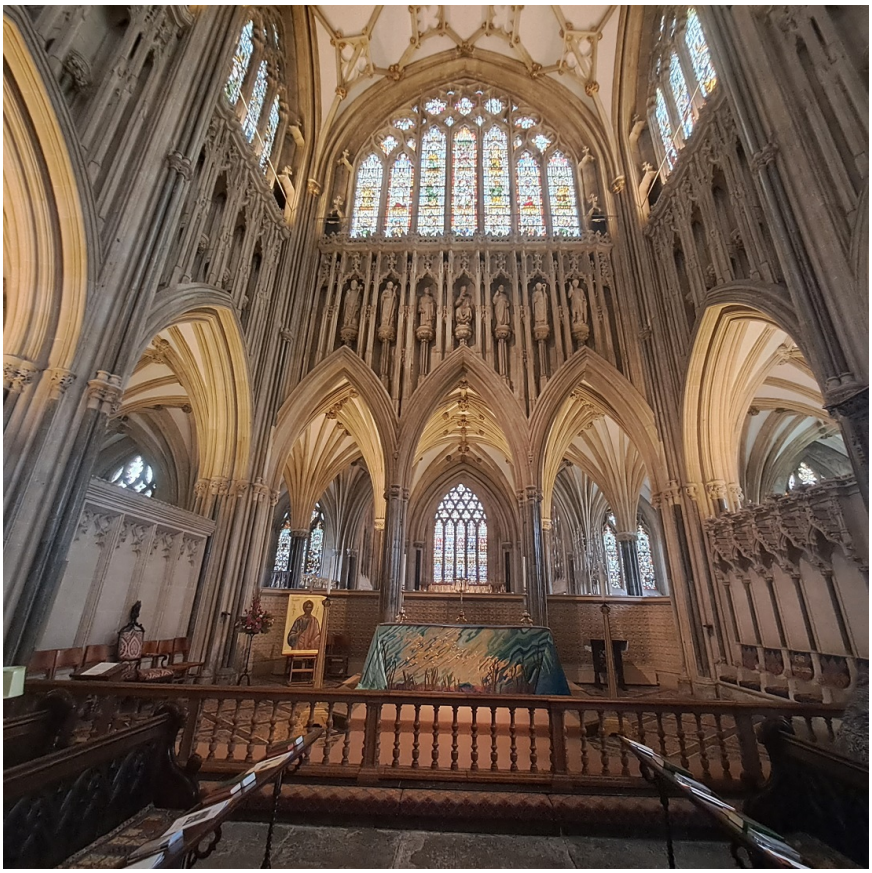
From living rich on food and wine
that purple prelates' palates please,
On pork terrine, poached salmon, truffles,
caviar, foie gras, French cheese;
Our bishop to reality returned
last month from overseas.
At Bishop's Council lunch he faced
a pie, tomato sauce and peas.

Sad faced, he sat full face to me
and eyed the soggy, faceless pie,
He rolled his eyes and pursed his lips,
he spooned on sauce, and gave a sigh,
He poked the thing, which promptly spilled
its gristly, gravy guts, to die,
Surrounded by the saucy peas,
to eat the which he had a try.

But memories of truffles, salmon,
Camembert and Stilton cheese,
Of Cambridge, Ely, London, Gloucester
(Ballarat's antitheses)
All caused him sadly to retire,
the pie uneaten (and the peas),
Regretting exile here to bitter
Ballarat antipodes.

(516) “This and That” - 24 September 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



The High Altar - Wells Cathedral

When I was Rector of the Parish of St John’s, Wodonga, in Australia, on the southern bank of the great river Murray, for a couple of years I was fortunate enough to have a young curate who was intelligent, articulate, an excellent mimic and very funny. We laughed a lot and he attempted to introduce me to popular culture by recommending films and novels of a sort that I was accustomed to disdain. He was a persuasive fellow, it proved impossible to resist his recommendations all of the time. I read some bizarre stuff.

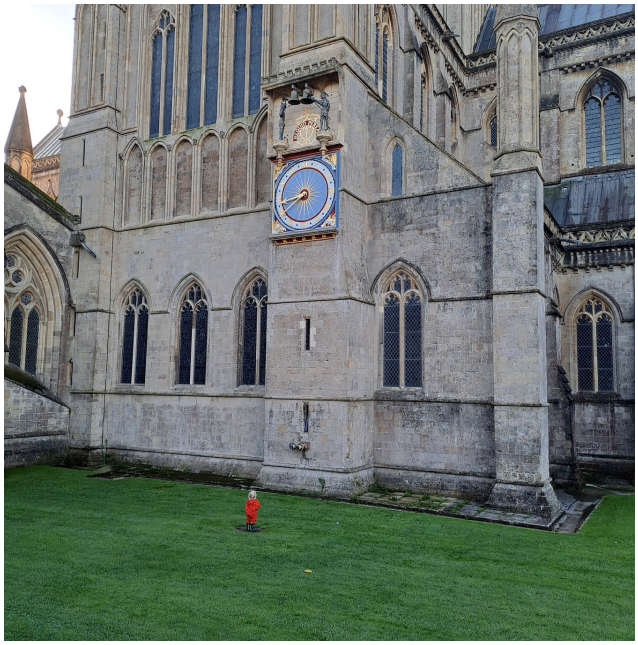
I remember to this day the intriguing hero of a strange novel set in the Amazon basin. The novel’s protagonist spent every moment of his life either in a wheelchair or walking on stilts because an Amerindian medicine man, with a head shaped like a pyramid, had placed him under a taboo. If ever his feet touched the ground he would die. He made sure they didn't.

Awe versus swagger

It was something that this fellow under taboo said about the recreational drugs he liked to use that particularly interested me. He maintained that some such drugs inflate or engorge the ego, whereas others deflate or diminish it and then went on to observe that he himself took only the latter sort, because he “preferred awe to swagger”. This intrigued me and even generated a sermon, because it struck me that the distinction between being awed and swaggering, might well be a part of what differentiates a religious from an irreligious person. Believers in God, if true to their belief, are those who prefer awe to swagger, deference to lording it, reverence to irreverence. They are folk happy to acknowledge that there is much in human experience that is more important than themselves, and that no one is master of his own soul and captain of his own destiny. To acknowledge and worship a supreme being, is to prefer awe to swagger.

Sooner an ant than an eagle

These thoughts came to mind because last week was full of awe for me. My youngest daughter, Ray and her little, nearly two year old son James were staying with us. On the second day Ray and I took the awe-inspiring, two hour long “High Parts Tour” of the Cathedral. It was also a week with a



A tiny boy wonderstruck by the blue clock

fair bit of rain and so we spend a lot of time walking little James around the inside of the glorious and capacious Cathedral. Its open spaces, safety from traffic, medieval clock, innumerable little corners, niches, chapels, monuments and cloisters to explore, as well as the echoing resonance to his piping voice, amused and delighted him for hours on end. To him the Cathedral was a wondrous and unusual playground. To us it was awesome, humbling, overwhelming and holy, but also the best of all possible play pens for an extremely intrepid and beautiful little boy.

Size plays a large part in awe inducing experiences. It must be easier to be awed by landscape as an ant, than as an eagle. To an ant even a mown lawn is an awesome forest. To an eagle floating thousands of feet above the earth everything is but a bland blanket or quilt. It is much the same for us. It's more awesome to be grounded and overwhelmed in the Amazonian jungle than to observe it through a plane's window.

Hempen homespuns

Shakespeare is among the first to use the word *swagger*. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the rustic tradesmen, Bottom, Quince, Snout, Flute, Snug and Starveling meet together in the woods to rehearse their play about Pyramus and Thisbe. They are observed by Robin Goodfellow who asks: *What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here?* The word is derived from *swag,* meaning to swing or sway, and it is good to have it at our disposal, because arrogance and self importance are so ubiquitous the more words available to describe, mock and call them out, the better.

There were arrogant young men in my youth who swaggered and swayed in ridiculously affected ways. Clusters of them gathered, idly smoking, around the cinema complex in Rhodesia's Salisbury when I myself was a yobbo. My brother and I were chased around the town by a group of them once. I only learned later that it was not a gratuitous attack, but a predictable response to my brother having given them the finger as we passed. We were returning from a visit to *La Boheme,* a local nightclub featuring "Tassel Tossing Tessie", whose show was innocent and modest by today's standards. It was more notable for her ability to rotate the tassels dangling from prominent parts of her anatomy in contrary motion than for explicit nudity.

My brother, an admirably pugnacious and courageous young fellow, with the suspicion of a swagger himself, was all for rolling up his sleeves and giving our pursuers as good as they were likely to give us. That was not for me, even way back then I preferred discretion to valour and awe to swagger! I was off like a cheetah, my brother, too heavily outnumbered, following reluctantly on my heels.

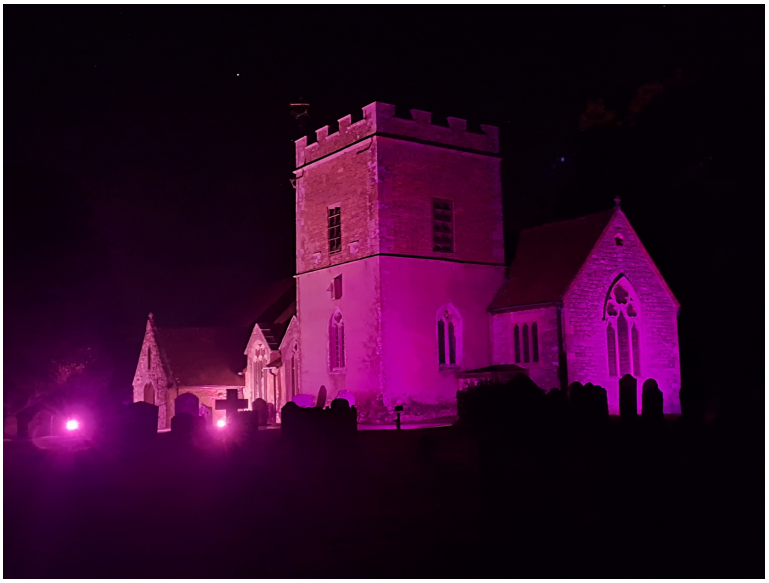
Opium of the people

Some of us, I suspect, are Christian by temperament, have an inborn inclination and attraction to Jesus of Nazareth and to the "Kingdom of God" he promoted, to awe rather than swagger. God's Kingdom, God's rule, the kingship of Christ, is radical, different, topsy turvy, it is monarchy turned upside down and inside out. The last are first, the first last. Cheeks are turned, enemies loved, injuries forgiven, second miles walked, outcasts welcomed into homes to dine, debtors are released from debt, the poor, the pure in heart, the merciful and the persecuted are blessed. Wealth is not amassed and hoarded because it's treasure in heaven that matters, and so generosity abounds, as do open hands and hearts. People, like the lilies of the field, are not anxious about what they wear or what they're to eat, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the sick are healed. Hypocrisy is out, truth and sincerity are in. Swaggering is most definitely out, awe and reverence characterise life.

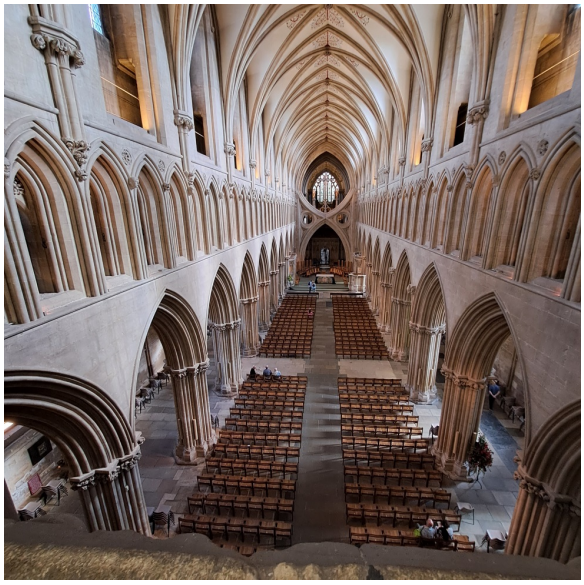
Karl Marx called religion the opium of the people. He is right. The residents of the Kingdom of God are, junkies, high on religion, the opium of the people but of the sort that diminishes the ego, kills self regard and self obsession to lead into a Kingdom characterised by reverence and awe, not swank and swagger.

(515) “This and That” - 17 September 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



St John’s Boldre mourns the late Queen Elizabeth II



Wells Cathedral - an angel’s view

St Andrew is the patron saint of Wells Cathedral. There’s a glittering icon of him on display in the sanctuary of the high altar. We gaze at each other in mutual admiration when I attend daily choral Evensong. Appropriately, because for nine and a half happy years we were in the same league, he was St Andrew of Galilee, Scotland and Wells and I was St Andrew of Boldre.

I am now demoted and learning to come to terms (not at all unhappily) with being plain Andrew the sinner, the washed up, dried out, superfluous, irrelevant has-been and pew-sitter of Wells.

A lousy sermon competition

How does life and worship at Wells compare with life and worship at Boldre? For a start, and speaking as plain Andrew the sinner, the washed up, dried out, superfluous, irrelevant has-been and pew sitter of Wells, I recall the sermons at Boldre as being superior to those of Wells. This is largely because, in my time at Boldre, the sermons, almost invariably, came from a single preacher who liked to sail close to the winds of propriety and orthodoxy. He was also a preacher whose approach and theology I was able wholeheartedly to affirm and with whom I was intimately acquainted, dearly loved and who now resides in Wells.

At the cathedral in Wells the sermons are ‘pick and mix’. A seemingly random selection of preachers means that no matter how talented each might be, there can be no guarantee of consistency in length or of style, substance, theology and derring do. Several sermons have been too long, not one short enough and although I’ve not heard a single bad one, none has brought me to the edge of my seat. This is a pity because in cathedrals, more than in parish churches, a good number of those attending worship are ‘cultural Christians’, not people of conviction and faith. They are present for aesthetic more than spiritual sustenance. This being so, sermons, or at least a proportion of sermons, need to be liberally inclusive, intriguingly boundary-pushing and robustly challenging rather than merely reassuring and comforting.

In all churches, but especially cathedrals, the music, the ceremony, the liturgy and the word should be reasonably proportionate to each other in length and quality. Sermons and intercessions should never be allowed to dominate, they are to be part of a balanced whole. There is no need to authenticate Mrs Moore’s jibe in E.M. Forster’s novel, *A Passage to India:* “poor little talkative Christianity...”. At sung Eucharists sermons should never, ever last more than ten minutes and the intercessions never more than five.

Now I come to think about it, there has been one really bad sermon to endure in the seven months we have been attending the cathedral. It was by a visitor and mercifully not as bad, though sadly much longer, than the little sermon that follows which was an entry, by a certain R J Pickles, to a 1995 *Lousy Sermon Competition* in the Spectator:

Faith hope and charity

Text: and now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Cor 13:13)

Charity. The expression `love' is often substituted for 'charity', but I prefer the original word. Love is such an amorphous term, all things to all men, including self-love. Whereas we all know charity means giving to others of our goods, our time and, yes, our love - but, most importantly, that perennial comforter a cup of tea, or char, from which 'charity' gets its name.

And, as we look around our world today, which is the greatest charity of all? .... Yes, the National Lottery, deriving its name from Lot, the Old Testament patriarch who was selected by God, in His charity, to survive disaster and live peacefully in the Land of Nod.

So, as God has given the Lottery the nod, so to speak, buy your tickets from the machine installed by the font. Remember 5p in the pound goes towards church funds.

The Gospel given its due

In our time at St John's Boldre, sung Eucharists very rarely lasted more than an hour. At the Cathedral it is usually an hour and ten or fifteen minutes. Given the numbers present and the often elaborate and lengthy musical settings, this is a remarkable achievement. Diana and I like to sit in the front row, if its available, because we love to observe as well as hear the liturgy seamlessly unfold, revelling in the music and the beautiful space. There can be few places of worship on earth, other than Wells, where the Gospel is so gloriously heralded and concluded each Sunday. A jubilant choir unleashes its trebles to soar, in the highest of registers, to the building's glorious ceiling and then away and beyond to the gates of heaven, as the Gospel deserves. Our beloved St John's Boldre could not match this. The composer of these glorious Wells Gospel acclamations is a local composer and choir leader.

Hymn singing in Boldre was more sensitively accomplished than in Wells though. In the cathedral the organist can be spied, in a far distant loft, above and well behind the choir and sanctuary. Hymns tend to be played fortissimo and it is unlikely that the organist can even hear the congregation. In St John's things are far more intimate and collaborative. Timothy, the organist, is strategically placed between the choir and congregation and is therefore aware and sensitive to both. This enables him musically to word and meaning paint the hymns with appropriate and lovely little organ riffs, descants and changes in volume. This means that at Boldre hymns, or particular verses of hymns, are musically prayed, sometimes poignantly and wistfully, at others thunderously in joyful praise. I miss this, as well as banter and camaraderie with a choir all known by name as friends.

Tottering retired clerics

At Boldre, Diana and I would arrive at church an hour or more before a service began. We were at the very heart of all that was to happen and as responsible as anyone for the tone, style, content and atmosphere of the day's worship. All of this was marked and emphasised by clerical gear. Dog collar on arrival, and then cassock, alb and eventually chasuble. Here at Wells we are outsiders, on the periphery of things, responsible for nothing. There are as many as 21 retired clergy strolling, staggering or tottering the streets of Wells and the aisles of the Cathedral.

We make our five minute stroll to worship on Sundays to the jubilant sound of bells and arrive a mere ten minutes of so before everything gets going. We receive our 'order of service' sheet from a smiling sidesman, amble the ambulatory to the front, select a chair and relax, free from the anxiety of responsibility, our minds and hearts at liberty to wander and wonder as the Spirit listeth. There's no clerical gear, I have never worn the throat-throttling, fallen halo that is a dog collar to the cathedral. I am indeed mere Andrew the sinner, the washed up, dried out, superfluous, irrelevant has-been, outsider and pew sitter of Wells. This new found nonentity is of the sort, I console myself by thinking, that my hero, my radical, subversive, revolutionary, challenger of authority and personal guru, Jesus of Nazareth, found particularly congenial.

(514) "This and That" - 10 September 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

There are honourable reasons for not believing in God and less honourable ones. In the local pub, an idly burping Paddy once informed Father O'Malley that he was an atheist, to which Father O'Malley perceptively responded: *"an atheist, Paddy, an atheist? You are no atheist, you are just a fat, lazy slob too idle to get up in the morning to go to Mass."*

There's a friend for little children

There are far more compelling reasons for unbelief than mere idleness though, reasons easy to sympathise with and more worthy of respect than disdain. However, not a few of them appear to arise from a lack of any help offered to make the transition from childhood belief to adulthood belief. Too few of us were ever encouraged, to grow up and mature in belief, we were never guided into creative ways to move beyond childish conceptions of God, or urged to wrestle with inadequate notions of God. We didn't learn to argue God, think through God, and so learn to know and experience God in ways that allow him to be, in be some way at least, a partial answer to evil, innocent suffering, death and tragedy, as well as a satisfying answer to the riddle of human existence.

So the god rejected, denied, and mocked by many dining room table and pub bar atheists might well be not God at all, but rather an imaginary god that mature Christians left behind with their childhood. A lovely god, certainly, no nursery should be without such a god, just as no nursery should be without Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddle Duck or Rupert Bear. God, *the Friend for little children, above the bright, blue sky, the Friend who never changes, whose love will never die.....* A god finally, totally and completely laid to rest for me personally by the Aberfan disaster where that hymn, *There's a friend for little children above the bright blue sky,* was a part of the memorial service. Some friend!

Yet whenever I find myself making this point, I cannot help thinking, "what a stuck-up, pseudo intellectual you sound, Andrew, old fruit. You reckon you've got God taped, do you? You've mastered a more sophisticated portrait of him have you? Is the God you've pinched from the intellectuals any more real or compelling than the God of your infancy and childhood? Are you a better disciple now than ever you were when a little boy, because of your more sophisticated view of God? I doubt it....."

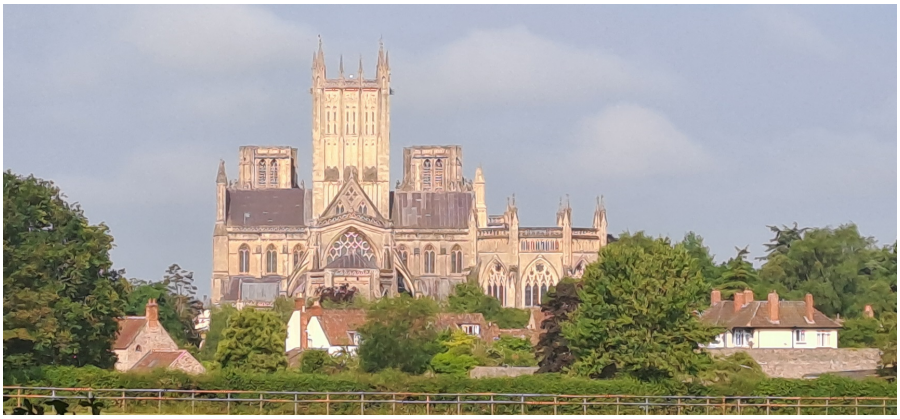
Pseudo intellectualism

Because the God of my childhood was indeed God, and love him I really did, and he me. He was the one true God, even if I understood him naively. All our understandings of God are naive, even our adult ones, even pseudo-intellectually sophisticated ones, even genuinely intellectual ones. Our belief and trust in the parents of our infancy and youth was also naive. We tended to see them as all wise and all knowing, as indestructible rocks upon which to cling securely through any storm. Only later did we learn of their fallibility and sometimes downright silliness which, in no way meant that they were unreal, or bad parents, or that they didn't love us, or that our relationship with them was worthless.

So too our personal relationship with God. Our view and understanding of him when young might have been naive, simplistic and unsophisticated, but if it was an authentic and reciprocally loving relationship it was of great benefit to us. Henry Vaughan a sophisticated 17th century priest, poet and mystic looked back with deep, deep longing to his infancy as the time when his love of God was most intense and more real than ever it was thereafter....

The Retreat

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel-infancy.....
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back—at that short space—
Could see a glimpse of His bright face;
When on some gilded cloud, or flower,
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;



Wells Cathedral - a quarry in the sky

Bright shoots of everlastingness

The reason I remain able to believe today, has far less to do with the more sophisticated notion of God's attributes, nature and way with the world, granted to me by being bought up in a household where God was argued, talked, wrestled with and questioned, than because the God of my nursery, the *friend of little children, above the bright blue sky,* was fair dinkum.

Like Henry Vaughan I look back on my childhood faith and God, not with condescension or with sophisticated scorn, but with deep, deep longing, because it was indeed a period of my life *when yet I had not walked above a mile or two from my first love, and looking back—at that short space—could see a glimpse of His bright face; when on some gilded cloud, or flower, my gazing soul would dwell an hour, and in those weaker glories spy some shadows of eternity;....Before I taught my tongue to wound my conscience with a sinful sound, or had the black art to dispense a several sin to every sense, but felt through all this fleshly dress bright shoots of everlastingness.*

But enough! Let's give God a break. Here is a beautiful, secular elegy for a lost childhood friend, not *above the bright blue sky,* but just down the road. We are all the better off for such a friend.,,,,

Brendon Gallacher

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.
He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.
His father was in prison; he was a cat burglar.
My father was a Communist Party full-time worker.
He had six brothers and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

He would hold my hand and take me by the river
where we'd talk all about his family being poor.
He'd get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.
A wee holiday some place nice. Some place far.
I'd tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher.

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.
And she'd say, 'Why not have him round to dinner?'
No, no, I'd say, he's got big holes in his trousers.
I like meeting him by the burn in the open air.
Then one day after we'd been friends for two years,

one day when it was pouring and I was indoors,
my mum says to me, 'I was talking to Mrs Moir
who lives next door to your Brendon Gallacher.
Didn't you say his address was 24 Novar?
She says there are no Gallachers at 24 Novar.

There never have been any Gallachers next door.'
And he died then, my Brendon Gallacher,
flat out on my bedroom floor, his spiky hair,
his impish grin, his funny, flapping ear.
Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher. (Jackie Kay b 1961)

(513) "This and That" - 3 September 2023

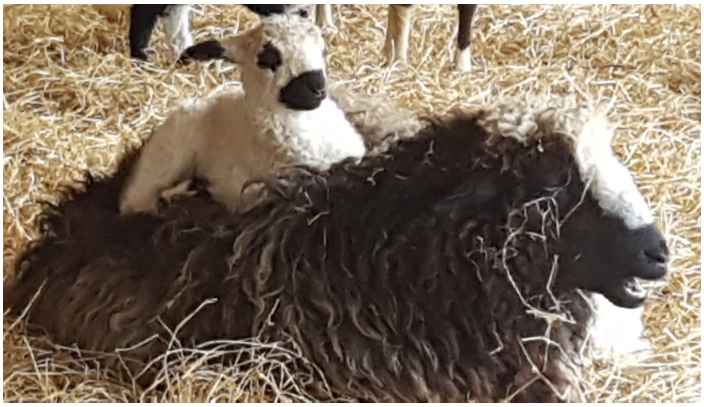
Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

I have a heavy cold which is in full spate as I write and detracts hugely from life's enjoyment. A partial remedy yesterday was a long walk with a pair of Heath Robinsonesque receptacles dangling from our necks to fill with blackberries. We gathered six pounds of them, but the virus lingers:

.....Bacilli swarm within my portals
Such as were ne'er conceived by mortals,
But bred by scientists wise and hoary
In some Olympic laboratory;
Bacteria as large as mice,
With feet of fire and heads of ice
Who never interrupt for slumber
Their stamping elephantine rumba..... (Ogden Nash)

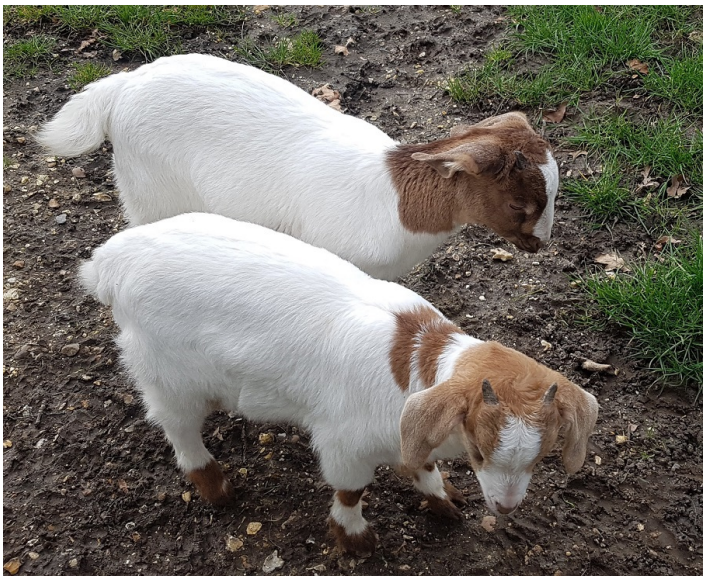
Larry the lamb and Gregory the goat

Every morning in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral we transition from Morning Prayer to the Eucharist by singing together a plainsong version of the *Benedictus*. It is lovely, so long as there are several well voiced choristers present. Occasionally there are not and then how terrible it can be if my voice is left to take a wavering and quavering lead. Larry the Lamb, Gregory the goat.



New born lamb, Warborne Farm, Boldre

Larry the lamb was conceived and brought into being in the late nineteen twenties. He lived a long and adventurous life in Toy Town, always a lamb, never growing old, until finally, in 1984, the year my first daughter Elizabeth was born on the island of St Helena, he disappeared from television screens. Mercifully, he departed without the slightest whiff of mint sauce and with resurrection appearances available on YouTube. He was a fine and doughty little lamb except for that quavery and wobbly voice, just like my own, though in the treble register. Baby goats have similarly quavery and wobbly voices. In Boldre we regularly walked past a fine family of them on Warborne farm and nearly always stopped to admire them and give them a feed of hedgerow hawthorn and hazel leaves.



Goat kids, Warborne Farm Boldre

The song of a goat

The word "tragedy" comes from the Greek *tragos* "he-goat" and *aeidein* "to sing", literally then, "the song of a goat". Addicted as I am to happy endings, I don't enjoy tragic drama, no matter how celebrated it might be. We have just watched an Australian television series called *"The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*". It's an intriguing title and contains some wondrous and imaginatively shot Australian scenery, but it is all to do with the violent abuse of children and women and progresses inevitably and inexorably to a predictably tragic conclusion. It left me wondering why anyone would willfully waste hours of what is left of their life listening to the singing of a goat? *A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest, Twelfth Night, Much Ado about Nothing*, yes, yes indeed. *Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear*, no thank you.

The Greeks developed a sophisticated rationale for tragic drama. In successful tragedies, according to Aristotle, a noble hero falls from good fortune to bad, not because of vice or depravity, but through

error or frailty, because of some fatal flaw: "*hamartia.*" Tragedies, performed ritually, he maintains, create an emotional effect in an audience that enables a sort of purging and emotional release called *catharsis,* to society's great benefit.

I myself don't get *catharsis,* and never have. Perhaps this is because the ritual element is missing when we experience tragedies these days. The sacrifice of a goat, incense, liturgical music and lot's of God stuff might do the trick. Sitting in a comfortable sitting room chair, or theatre seat, denies any form of *catharsis* to the likes of me.

Phantastes

To be addicted to happy endings is a form of escapism I suppose, though I am all too well aware of the *lachrimae rerum* (the tearfulness of things). Life is sad, sad, sad. Among my favourite and most often quoted snatches of verse are the first four lines of a profoundly Christian poem by George MacDonald (1824-1905). The first two stanzas of the poem are realistically pessimistic, but they are then balanced and put into a truer and more reflective perspective by the final two. MacDonald was a Scottish author, poet and Congregational minister. He became a pioneering figure in the field of modern fantasy literature and a mentor of Lewis Carroll.

He was hugely influential throughout the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis, in a little book entitled, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, which I once possessed but no longer do, wrote that a few hours after reading MacDonald's fantasy novel *Phantastes*, "I knew I had crossed a great frontier..... I know hardly any other writer who seems closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ himself." G. K. Chesterton cited *The Princess and the Goblin* as a book that had "made a difference to my whole existence". Here is the poem:

Sweet Peril

Alas, how easily things go wrong!
A sigh too much, a kiss too long,
And there follows a mist and weeping rain,
And life is never the same again.

Alas, how hardly things go right!
Tis hard to watch in the summer night,
For the sigh will come, and the kiss will stay,
And the summer night is a winter day.

And yet how easily things go right,
If the sigh and a kiss of a summer's night
Come deep from the soul in the stronger ray
That is born in the light of a winter's day.

And things can never go badly wrong
If the heart be true and the love be strong.
For the mist, if it comes, or the weeping rain
Will be changed by the love into sunshine again.

In George Macdonald's novel *David Elginbrod,* which is a story of humble Scottish country life and well worth reading, though difficult until you get used to the dialect of Aberdeen, there occurs a notable epitaph which is quoted as if from a gravestone in Aberdeen. Whether it is actually there, on a particular gravestone, or was composed by MacDonald himself for his novel I am not sure, but it accords with his theology, for in 1850 he had become the pastor of a church at Arundel, but after three years of not living up to expectations he resigned. The congregational authorities wanted more dogmatic sermons and accused him of heresy. He had rejected his Calvinist upbringing and the doctrine of predestination, believed in the divine presence but not divine providence and felt that everyone was capable of redemption.

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde:
Have mercy on my soul, Lord God;
As I would do, were I Lord God,
And you were Martin Elginbrodde.

(512) "This and That" - 27 August 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Bullfinches have larger brains than most birds of their size. They are also strictly monogamous, two attributes that go together it seems. Monogamy requires a great deal of cognitive effort in watching, anticipating and empathising with a mate.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries male bull finches were popular as pets, not only for their beauty, but also because of their singing prowess. Although their natural song is unremarkable, if they are taken from the nest as youngsters and made to listen to a tune whistled over and over again for two or three weeks, they are able to memorise and reproduce it more perfectly than their whistling tutor. A certain Professor Birkhead has told us that they're better than a Labrador at falling in love with their owner and that their perfection in memorising and singing up to three songs could well be an attempt to elicit a response from the owner they've fixated upon and bonded with.

In 1788 the pet bullfinch of Mrs Throckmorton met a tragic end at the hands and teeth of a marauding rat. The unhappy occasion gave rise to a fine piece of occasional verse by her friend William Cowper (1731-1800). Here are a mere 24 of its 66 lines:

On The Death
Of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch

.... only with a whistle blessed,
Well-taught he all the sounds expressed
Of flageolet or flute....

Night veiled the pole: all seemed secure:
When, led by instinct sharp and sure,
Subsistence to provide,
A beast forth sallied on the scout,
Long backed, long tailed, with whiskered snout,
And badger-coloured hide.

.... aided both by ear and scent,
Right to his mark the monster went,--
Ah, Muse! forbear to speak

Minute the horrors that ensued;
His teeth were strong, the cage was wood--
He left poor Bully's beak....

Oh, he had made that too his prey!
That beak, whence issued many a lay
Of such mellifluous tone,
Might have repaid him well, I wote,
For silencing so sweet a throat,
Fast stuck within his own.

.....The tree-enchanter Orpheus fell,
His head alone remained to tell
The cruel death he died.

Cowper was the most popular poet of his day and little wonder, for at his best he's marvellous. "No object is too small to prompt his song.... and yet his song is never trivial, for he is alive to small objects, not because his mind is narrow, but because his glance is clear and his heart is large" wrote George Eliot. While celebrating the small details of daily life, Cowper looks through and beyond them to a wider vision which they express. "Like his admirer William Blake he can 'see a World in a grain of sand, and a Heaven in a wildflower....'"

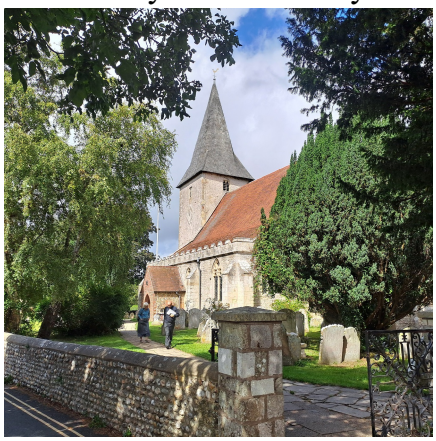
Bureaucratic verse

Occasional verse is written for, or prompted by, a special occasion, be it a military or sporting victory, a birth, a wedding, a funeral or an anniversary. Such verse could well be the origin of all verse and in days long gone was as often as not performed not only publically, but accompanied by music. It plays a prominent role in the culture of the ancient Greeks and Romans and has continued to do so throughout Western literary history as well as in Arabic, Persian, Japanese, Korean and Chinese literature. It can be light and comic or profound, elevated, and inspiring. It is important as a meeting place between poetry and the real world of events and happenings. Famous examples include "*The Charge of the Light Brigade*" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, prompted by the Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War; "*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*" by Julia Ward Howe about the American Civil War; and "*The Day Lady Died*" by Frank O'Hara about the death of Billie Holiday. The American poet Elizabeth Alexander wrote and delivered an occasional verse for the inauguration of President Barack Obama: "*Praise Song for the Day*". Devoid of rhyme and any

obvious rhythm and metre it received a lukewarm reception for being too prosaic and was dismissed by fellow poet Adam Kirsch as "bureaucratic verse."

Bosham and King Canute's daughter

Last Sunday, in Chichester, there occurred an occasion significant enough to spur Diana and myself to travel the hundred miles from Wells to participate and, on the previous day, to encourage me to spend hours wrestling with rhymes for the word "nine" to produce a piece verse in its honour. It was the ninety ninth birthday of a fine old fellow with all his faculties intact, though somewhat deaf.



Holy Trinity Bosham

We departed early in order to attend the 11.00am Eucharist in Chichester Cathedral, seasoned cathedral worshippers as we are these days. We made such good time we were able to turn aside to look over the small hamlet of Bosham (pronounced Bozzum) a couple of miles west of Chichester. It is situated on one of the peninsulas that project into the fascinating mosaic of estuaries, peninsulas and islands that make up Chichester Harbour. High tide waters lap the front walls of its waterfront dwellings and we parked our car on a seaweed-slippery road, before walking up to its ancient church. As we approached we heard a familiar version of the Gloria being sung and so entered to join a congregation of about eighty folk at worship and were rewarded by a good sermon from a properly chasubled priest, a dazzlingly played recessional fugue by Handel, three chocolate digestive biscuits, a cup of coffee and some interesting conversations.

There are many traces of Roman occupation and activities all about the village and the church is situated on the oldest Christian site in Sussex and it is mentioned by name on the Bayeux Tapestry. The accidentally drowned daughter of King Canute is said to be buried in the church and some substance to this tradition was granted in 1865 by the discovery of an Anglo Saxon coffin, containing a child's skeleton, buried in the nave in front of what is now the chancel. After six months of cathedral worship it was refreshing to be back in a lively, village church whose worship took me all the way back to Christchurch Skipton, in Australia and not so far back to St John's Boldre. I do love the company of village churchgoers.

All the dogs of Europe bark

Occasional verse, of the sort that I enjoy writing and reciting pales into the ridiculous and insignificant when compared with the sublimity of some of our master poets. William Yeats died at the beginning of momentous 1939. W H Auden's poem to mark the occasion, *In Memory of WB Yeats,* is written in three distinct parts and styles, each of them superb. Here is the last of the three parts with its wondrous final three stanzas:

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

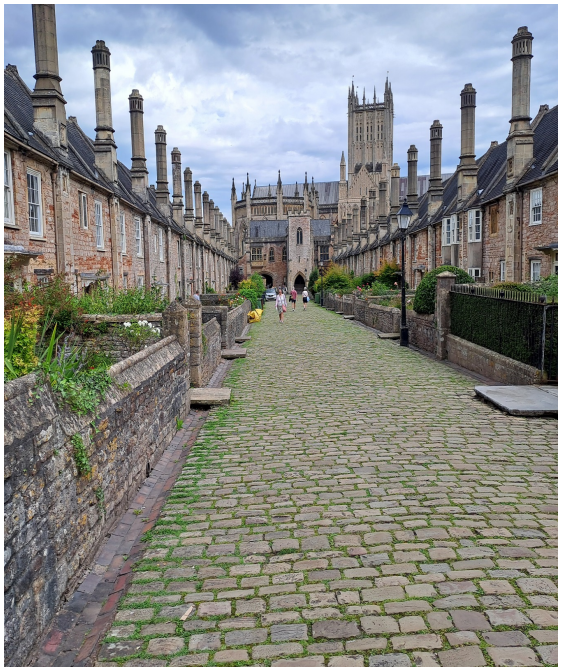
Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

(511) “This and That” - 20 August 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



Wells Cathedral viewed from Vicar’s Close

There is a malady common to many preachers from which, I like to think, I have never suffered: *homiletic logorrhea,* preaching more than you have to say.

The punch of panache

My sermons are hugely forgettable to myself, though. There’s not one, memorable phrase from all the tens of hundreds I’ve composed and delivered over forty seven years that comes readily back to mind. I am able to recall with ease, however, phrases and stanzas from the many poems I’ve quoted in sermons to give them the lift and punch of panache so necessary in a sermon and yet so, so rare:

Sidney Carter:
You can blame it on to Pilate, you can blame it on the Jews,
You can blame it on the Devil, it's God I accuse.
It’s God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me
I said to the Carpenter a-hangin on the tree....
Miguel Guevara:
At length what moves me is your love, and thus,
if heaven were not real, I'd still love you;
if hell untrue, I'd fear you nonetheless.
You owe me nothing for loving you like this,
since if I did not hope for what I do,
I'd love you, Lord, with equal tenderness.
Ezra Pound:
He cried no cry when they drave the nails and the blood gushed hot and free,
The hounds of the crimson sky gave tongue but never a cry cried he.
I ha’ seen him cow a thousand men on the hills o’ Galilee,
They whined as he walked out calm between, wi’ his eyes like the grey o’ the sea,
Charles Causley:
Peter jumped up in the pulpit his hands all smelling of fish,
He guernsey was gay with the sparky spray and white as an angel's wish....
Stoke up the engine-room boilers with slices of heavenly toast!
The devil's a weasel and travels on diesel but I burn the Holy Ghost!.....

A cure for ‘hysterick cholik’

John Wesley (1703–1791), a far more effective preacher than I, in one of his sermons left us an instantly memorable phrase: “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” Hygiene meant much to him. In an article, not a sermon, he commended cold baths as a cure for blindness and leprosy, as well as for “hysterick cholik”. It was in the same century that a stove maker from Ludgate Hill, William Feetham, invented the first ever mechanical shower. It was a crude device that utilised a pump to force water to an upper basin fitted with a chain to pull and release water over the head and shoulders of anyone wishing to be so sluiced. Advantageously it meant that far less heated water had to be carried upstairs for ablutions, less advantageous was the use it made of the same water over and over again as it grew dirtier and colder.

The design of Feetham’s mechanism was enhanced and refined as time went by, but didn’t gain wide popularity until a French physician, in 1872, designed the first mass showers for the prisoners in Rouen gaol. These were for male prisoners only: rows of shower stalls, similar to prison cells, allowed easy surveillance to warders. The water was heated by a steam engine and, in less than five minutes, eight prisoners could wash simultaneously using only twenty litres of water. Eventually such showers began to be used in gymnasiums, army barracks and more especially in psychiatric hospitals. Throughout the late Victorian era a cold “shower-bath” was deemed an excellent treatment for psychosis and more specifically for hysteria and so such showers began to be seen as appropriate for women as well as men. Dirtiness became a symbol for the madness of the hysteric and sluicing such folk with cold water came to be interpreted as a symbolic cleansing of their deviance.

A shower of whine and whinge

In my childhood on Tristan da Cunha, and then again, nearly thirty years later, as an adult on St Helena, water for bathing was heated in a small “chip-boiler” in the bathroom. Cardboard, twigs and finely chopped bits of of wood were used as fuel for a small furnace that speedily heated water circulated around it to provide hot water for a weekly bath, the first child in clean water, the next in less clean water and the third in downright dirty water. It was only when we arrived in Australia that the unutterable delight of a daily shower rendered baths a thing of the past.

In America the phrase “Showering after work” has become a popular signifie of class. If you shower in the morning, you work a desk job and therefore, by inference are paid more than if you shower in the evening after some form of manual labour. Politicians and pundits alike have latched on to the imagery of “shower after work” to brandish their populist bona fides and demonstrate a connection with hardworking people in jobs that leave them dirty at the end of the day.

We have a fine shower in our home here in Wells but, of late and inexplicably, it has begun to whine loudly once it has been turned on for a minute of two. Much fiddling reduces the whine to a faint whinge and a return of peaceful, scalding bliss. We will probably have to call in an expert to restore contentment and happiness to our whingeing plumbing.

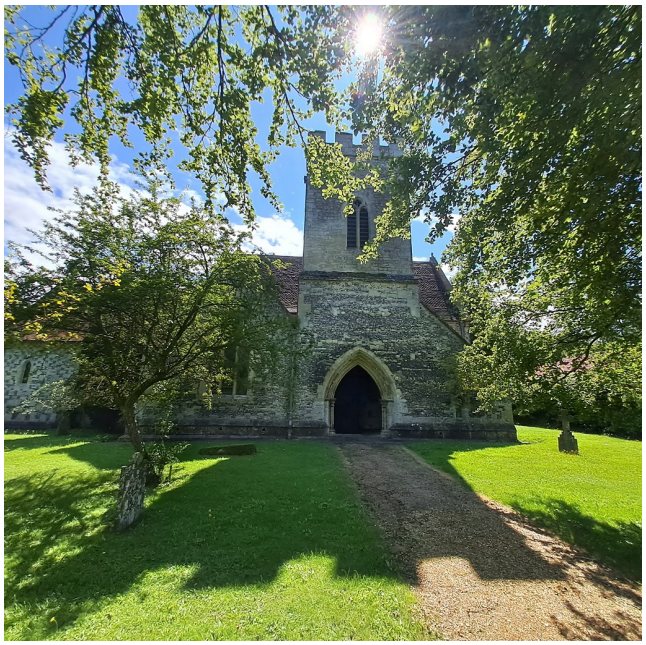
Tax, spinach, fetta, lasagne and beef

I am in the happy position, at this stage of my life, of looking forward to going to bed each night and just as eagerly to getting up. Both practices are marked by their own pleasing little rituals. It is the morning shower, after a shave, that’s the highlight of my early rising.

It has been a good week. For the first time ever I have filled out online my own tax return, successfully translating Australian dollars to pounds at the exchange rate going at the date of their reception and then, after a telephone conversation with the friendliest and most helpful lady from HMC, I confidently submitted it. What is more, thanks to our ‘allotment’ garden’s prolific spinach, corvettes, beans and potatoes, I have made my very first spinach and fetta cheese pastry, my first ever spinach, courgette and cheddar lasagne and finally my speciality, fourteen densely packed beef pasties.

(510) "This and That" - 13 August 2023

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells



St Mary's Boyton

Deviancy has its delights. Take breakfast, for instance. Here in Wells, as in Boldre, our all but invariable staple is "fruit soup". This is a concoction of home bred kafir with its unpleasant taste negated by blending it with a banana or two, a whole pear, the juice of a couple of oranges, a generous handful of blueberries, or any other fruit abundantly available and a dollop of natural yoghurt. They are all whizzed to a frothy soup and slurped down with appreciative gusto.

Footling dabbles in deviancy

The more invariable a routine the more pleasurable it is to deviate from it, though. When staying with others, or out and about with no access to a blender, it is delightful to be reacquainted with the notorious full English breakfast of yore: sausages, bacon, fried egg, mushrooms and tomato or, more modestly, with fondly remembered cereals followed by toast and marmalade. Such footling dabbles in deviancy do indeed delight. When grandchildren happen to be about, "Cheerios" are a favoured breakfast cereal, there was a large box available when we were on the canal barge last month. To my chagrin these turned out to be more "Saddles" than "Cheerios". Wowsers appear to have had their way with them to reduce their sugar content. For once deviancy disappointed.

The pleasures of travelling by car can be enhanced by deviancy too. Our all but invariable route from Boldre to Wells is via Salisbury, Wilton and then along the relatively fast but humdrum A36. On our last trip, with time in hand, we deviated at Stafford to meander the narrow country lanes of the Wylye Valley, through Little Langford, Wylye, Bapton, Stockton, Sherrington, Boyton and so on. At Boyton we stopped for a cup of soup and a biscuit, pulling up alongside its remarkable and ancient church, set cheek by jowl with a large 17th century Manor House and on the edge of a lush estate.

The church's entrance porch doubles as a bell ringing chamber, for the tower is built in the middle of the building's north side. After a rewarding wander around inside, we found ourselves just as interested outside in some nearby ancient trees and waded through lush grass to inspect a couple of them more closely. One, with heavy foliage right down to the ground, particularly intrigued us and we discovered it to be well fruited with clusters of what appeared to be hazelnuts, though each cluster was fused at the basspined and bristled husk. We have since identified it as *Corylus Killarney,* the Turkish Hazelnut. It's apparently a hardy tree, ideal for large lawns, street plants and urban conditions, its foliage largely impervious to insects and disease and once well established tolerant of heat, cold, and drought. The filberts or nuts, though edible and tasting like hazelnuts, are smaller, with a three millimetre thick and very hard shell and so of little commercial value. However, unlike the common hazel, they don't sucker and so make ideal rootstock upon which to graft more commercially valuable varieties of the tree.

Fruit of the Turkish Hazelnut

Deviancy in North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran

As Christianity declines in western societies all the faithful are likely to become deviants in their divergence from new and fashionable societal norms. Already some of the more intellectually insecure

of our "celebrities" and of the "commandeered" feel compelled to declare publically their conformity to changing fashion by asserting their atheism. Perhaps my footling little dabbles in the delights of deviancy are destined to become more momentous and sacrificial and my pride in the Christian faith more daring than heretofore. As is already the case for practising Christians in North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In sadder times than these we now enjoy in Britain, homosexuality was considered to be so unacceptably deviant that conformists to societal norms criminalized its expression in any way or form. This blighted the lives of many, including the poet A E Houseman. Sadly, a good number of those who insisted on this criminalization were motivated by convictions they considered to be Christian and so any drift into deviancy for Christians in general will be a salutary dose of our own medicine, though in this land it is unlikely to be as vicious and nasty as that suffered by the likes of Oscar Wilde. A E Houseman's poignant and anguished response to the arrest and conviction of Wilde says it all:

The Colour of His Hair

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after, that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is;
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
But they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they're haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet,
And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare
He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.

Why art thou so vexed?

Never have I heard psalms sung so sensitively, meditatively and brilliantly as at last Monday's and Tuesday's Choral Evensong. The Wells Cathedral Choir is on holiday and so a variety of visiting choirs have been doing us the honours and last week it was *The Priory Singers* from Belfast. On Tuesday the exquisitely sung psalms were 42 and 43:

Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks:
so longeth my soul after thee, O God.....

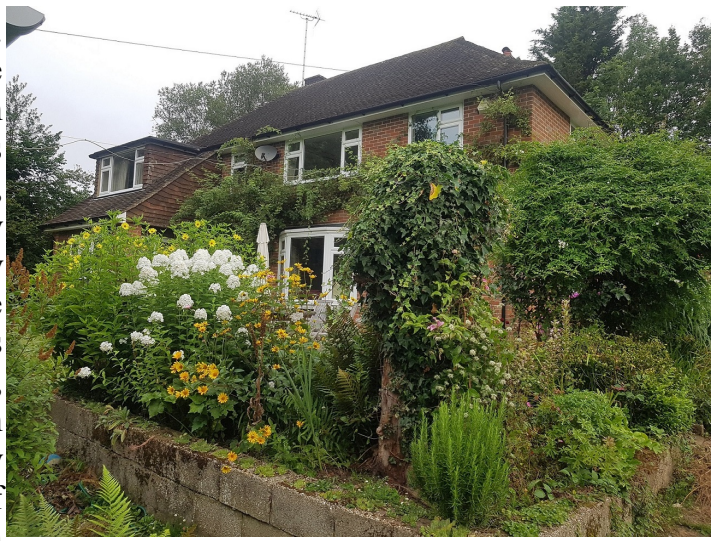
It does it does.....

Why art thou so vexed, O my soul:
and why art thou so disquieted within me?
O put thy trust in God: for I will yet thank him,
which is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Indeed, indeed, indeed.....

(509) “This and That” - 6 August 2023

Most fine old English vicarages are now inhabited by stockbrokers, bankers, and swankers. There are good reasons for this, not least the expense of heating and maintaining them on exceedingly modest clerical salaries, but it is regrettable. Admirable and often beautiful stone, bricks and mortar are exchanged for mere money which, like water, too easily and most usually disappears without trace. Short term goals leave long term holes. The great stone deanery on Wells Cathedral Close is now in private ownership, though there has been a tangible and useful return for its loss: an admirably functional, though ugly administrative building in the industrial part of town and called optimistically, if risibly, “Flourish House”.



Chiddingfold Rectory

Acidic scrumpy

I recall with delight the Staffordshire vicarage that my father turned his back on in favour of a tiny, wooden bungalow on a lonely, rain drenched, wind swept island. Set in a small Staffordshire village it was capacious, with a large garden and outbuildings that included a sort of barn in which he cured his own bacon. There was a croquet lawn with challenging hazards and, best of all, beehives. Little wonder that last week, with Diana, I took nostalgic delight to assist my son David harvest honey from the hives he lovingly tends in Chiddingfold’s fine Rectory. We arrived in time to see him, swathed like Lazarus, in protective gear and with a hive smoker in his hand, but only got properly involved in the spinning of combs to extract the honey by centrifugal force and then in the sieving and bottling of the viscous, golden liquid as we chewed gobbets of honey-steeped wax.

We have been staying for a couple of weeks in Diana’s son’s house in Haslemere, minding their dogs while they’re on holiday in Greece. For part of the time we’ve had my son Peter from Australia with us and my daughter Rachel, her husband Tom and their irrepressible, smiling, clambering, nearly two year old son James. It has been good family time, because David and his family are a mere four miles away in Chiddingfold. Peter has helped us to replace, synchronise and organise our two computers, usually a painful, disruptive and frustrating exercise, but not so this time. His love of pork pies, pasties and marzipan enriched our diet and his sense of humour our enjoyment of life. He also encouraged us, while we were together in Wells, to do a little exploring and so discover nearby an authentic, rough, cobwebby Somerset farm-cider establishment, where we sat in a gloomy barn to drink a free half pint of scrumpy straight from the barrel and then another. It lowered our resistance sufficient to persuade us to buy a plastic bottled gallon of the stuff, to raise our spirits at home and, if necessary, double as paint stripper. Beneath the barrel’s tap the acidity of scrumpy drips, over many years, had carved a deep runnel in the concrete.

Healing a Lunatic Boy

I was required a few weeks ago to attend yet another of the Church of England’s safeguarding seminars in the aforementioned *Flourish House*. Because the two folk who led the seminar were relaxed and amiable, rather than aggressive zealots, it was almost good fun. We were asked to bring along with us and be prepared to talk briefly about a piece of prose, a poem, painting or artifact that meant something to us and might be apposite to the discussion. I chose a poem by Charles Causley called *Healing a Lunatic Boy*. It is a tour de force, suggesting that the cool, rational. prosaic and literal world of sanity, too often achieved only by zombiefying folk with drugs, is not necessarily preferable to, let alone a “cure”, for what might well be the shimmering, brilliant, metaphorical world of madness. It is sometimes best to go along with, accept and let be, rather than to ‘cure’. Here are two stanzas in which the boy talks of his ‘lunatic’ world and the final sixth in which he describes his ‘cured’, sane world:

Trees turned and talked to me,
Tigers sang,
Houses put on leaves,
Water rang.
Flew in, flew out
On my tongue's thread
A speech of birds
From my hurt head....

On a stopped morning
The city spoke,
In my rich mouth
Oceans broke.
No more on the spun shore
I walked unfed.
I drank the sweet sea,
Stones were bread....

Now the pebble is sour,
The birds beat high,
The fern is silent,
The river dry.
A seething summer
Burned to bone
Feeds at my mouth
But finds a stone.

An excess of rationality, logic, order and sanity can be arid, cold and souless. Which is why the zaniness, foolishness, extravagance and even madness of religion can be so invigorating and refreshing.

Diagnosing Jesus

Was Jesus of Nazareth a lunatic? There were those among his contemporaries who thought so. St John's Gospel tells us that when Jesus talked of laying down his life for his flock his words divided his listeners, many of whom said: *"He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?"*

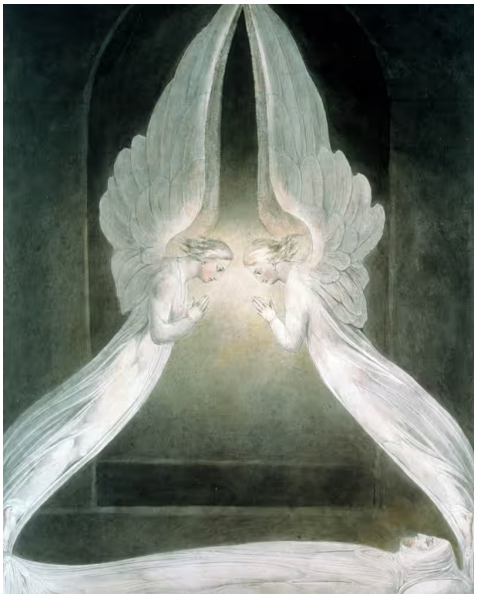
From the 18th century onwards there have been those who have agreed, arguing that Jesus was indeed bonkers, though not until the quest for the historical Jesus gathered critical momentum in the 19th century did it became a fashionable proposition. In 1912 a group of psychiatrists, behavioural psychologists, neurologists and neuropsychiatrists at Harvard diagnosed Jesus as likely to have been suffering from "*paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar and schizoaffective disorders"* and to have been seeking suicide by indirect means. How dull and unimaginative to reduce so intriguing and fascinating a figure to with such a prosaic diagnosis. It is also ridiculous. The inner life of Jesus is inaccessible to us, the Gospels give us a lightly limned, intriguing portrait not a detailed biography. As Pope Benedict pointed out *"the texts give us no window into Jesus' inner life–Jesus stands above our psychologizing."*

Tyger tyger burning bright

Between 1757and 1827 there lived a poet, artist, engraver and printmaker who, like Jesus of Nazareth with his parables, aphorisms and teaching, bequeathed to the world wondrous and sometimes dazzling works of art, poetry and gems of wisdom:

Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.



William Blake: Angels hovering over the body of Jesus in the sepulchre

William Blake was also considered mad by many. At the age of eight, walking on Peckham Rye he saw, he says, "*A tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars*." He continued to see such visions throughout his life, his political views were anti-monarchical and radical. He appeared to advocate, though not practise, free love as well as nudity which he did practise, his benefactor Thomas Butts called on the Blakes at their home in Lambeth and found them freed from *"those troublesome disguises"*, that is, naked. *"Come in!"* cried Blake. *"It's only Adam and Eve, you know."* He was once caught reciting Paradise Lost with his wife, both of them starkers. While, in a sense, profoundly Christian, he deplored institutional religion and rejected many of orthodox Christianity's tenets, like the virgin birth and St Paul's take on sin. He also rejected the rationalist world view of the Enlightenment and deplored the unimaginative narrowness of Isaac Newton. Yet how fascinating, wise, eccentric and intriguing he was. William Wordsworth said of him *"There was no doubt that this poor man was mad, but there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."*

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