Home

FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

January to June 2024

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

(555) “This and That” - 30 June 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

“The Mona Liza of Socialism” is what Jean-François Millet’s painting “Man with a Hoe” has been dubbed. It proved controversial from the moment of its 1863 debut and is considered “one of the most provocative icons of manual labour ever painted”

Jean-François Millet’s ‘Man with a Hoe

“.....His hands pressing down on the handle of his crude tool, an exhausted worker looks up to catch his breath. The placement of his hat and jacket nearby suggest how slow his progress tilling the ground has been. The rocky, uncultivated terrain is stubborn, a far cry from the fertile plain beyond. Though stooped and weary, the worker is an imposing figure who looms above the horizon and greatly out-scales the woman burning weeds and the plowing team in the distance.”

(The website of J Paul Getty Museum, now the painting’s home)

A repugnant "cretin" and "idiot"

The labourer’s hoe in the painting is identical to what was called a “badza” in Rhodesia, a far more useful tool than the longer handled English hoe. The labourer himself takes me right back to my days of working on a Rhodesian farm during university vacations. I was in charge of a band of beer-brawl-scarred men not dissimilar to the one depicted in Millet’s painting, whom contemporary critics dismissed as a repugnant “cretin” and “idiot”. Caricaturists mocked the perceived deformation of the man’s skull and a caption beneath one of the contemporary cartoons lampooning the painting tells us that the “unfortunate peasant” is “in the hope of finding the other half of his head.”

Until I got to know and then appreciate and enjoy the ribald and rough rascals I looked after on the Rhodesian farm, they too appeared dauntingly and crudely primitive. We ended up having a lot of fun, though as they worked they sang over and over again the following unedifying ditty:

Uya, uya, uya pano uya (Come, come, come here come)
Iwe, iwe, mina blalla iwe. (You, you, I’ll kill you)

The whirlwinds of rebellion

I happened upon Millet’s painting by way of a famous epigram by the American poet Edwin Markham, which came to mind when I was contemplating writing about the difficulties of becoming a member of any ‘inner circle’, be it the boss’s, the bishop’s or the prime minister’s:

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

Edwin Markham 1852–1940 achieved international fame as a poet, not on the strength of that little quatrain, but for writing a poem inspired by Millet’s painting called *“The Man with the Hoe”*. It’s a powerful piece of verse, here are the first and last of five stanza:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not, and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings–
With those who shaped him to the thing he is–
When this dumb terror shall rise to judge the world,
After the silence of the centuries?

The last stanza seems remarkably prescient. It asks how the rulers and ruling classes will cope *"When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores* and when *this dumb terror shall rise to judge the world, after the silence of the centuries?*

The answer to the question, surely, is "not very well, not at all admirably". The internet, mobile phones, universal education and social media have broken *the silence of the centuries*, "the common man" has now a voice and has begun and is continuing *to rise to judge the world after the silence of the centuries...* and in so many and diverse ways. Mass migration might well be seen as mere redress: as colonialism in reverse and populism as an inevitable consequence of elitism.

A travel scarred veteran

In one of my childrens' talks at St John's Boldre, which were so much more popular than the sermon that followed, I talked about my mother's bread making skills when we lived on Tristan da Cunha and in the African bush. As is my wont, I made a dangerous aside, which suggested that it might be a good thing if Diana attempted to emulate her in this regard. A few days later one of those many, splendid and generous parishioners who've so blessed my long life, turned up at the Vicarage with a bread maker, superfluous, she claimed, to her own requirements. It was given to us "on loan" with one proviso, that the Vicar himself rather than his long suffering wife, should be the sole user of it.

St Andrew's Cathedral, Wells, from the cloister garden

The machine is still with us and Diana has never operated it. It is a travel scarred and worn veteran of a machine these days. When it kneads the dough it throws itself about and even inches silently forward on its little rubber-soled feet. One day, when my back was turned, it edged itself over the lip of the counter and fell with a great crash to the kitchen floor. I picked it up in horror, noticing an ominous crack in its inner casing, but like a plucky, brutally tackled rugby player, once on its feet again it continued as if nothing had happened and the vicarage was soon redolent with the most beautiful of all of civilized humanity's aromas. The loaf's crust, still warm, heavily buttered and accompanied by teaspoons of the flesh of a perfectly boiled, extra large egg, provided as divine a luncheon as any on earth. That travel scarred veteran bread maker continues to honour the Lord's Prayer by supplying our daily bread.

(554) “This and That” - 23 June 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

St Michael and All Angels Parish Church, Somerton

Gazing into a mirror brings little joy to an old man. In a letter to Nepotan, a young soldier turned priest, St Jerome, way back in the fifth century, says of himself: “*my head is gray, my brow is furrowed, a dewlap like that of an ox hangs from my chin”*.

Sweet swan songs

A sagging, scraggy neck does give the game away particularly cruelly. However, the consolation of old age is purported to be wisdom and he goes on to say:

> *“Themistocles, perceiving, after the expiration of one hundred and seven years, that he was on the verge of the grave, is reported to have said that he regretted extremely having to leave life just when he was beginning to grow wise .... the poets Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, Stesichorus, who all lived to a great age, yet at the approach of death sang each of them a swan song sweeter than their wont....”*

I am four years older than St Jerome was when he died and like to think that I too, as with Homer and co, have grown in wisdom sufficient to be singing swan songs sweeter than has been my wont heretofore. As I survey the diocese of Bath and Wells, and take services in local churches that are sparsely attended and being cobbled by the diocese into larger and larger benefices, minded by fewer and fewer priests, I feel an urge to pass on some wise counsel to the bishops of the Church of England. Radical counsel too, taking as its starting point further advice from the letter of St Jerome to Nepotan: *“A clergyman who engages in business..... avoid as you would the plague”*.

Pretending to new tricks

So here’s my advice to bishops who will never read it. Don’t run dioceses as businesses, too many of you have become managerial monetarists, over staffed, over strategizing, too full of business jargon and too fond of goals, growth, red tape and empty shibboleths like ‘mission’ and ‘vision’.

I recall with horror, as a mere ‘House for Duty’ priest at Boldre, being required to concoct and compose, with the help of my long suffering parishioners, truly dreadful “Mission Action Plans”, a task imposed upon all the parishes in the diocese of Winchester. It forced an experienced old dog of a parish priest like me to pretend to new tricks, whereas in reality all we did was translate my hard earned, well-tried experience and practice into managerial-speak to satisfy faceless goons at the diocesan registry.

If I were a bishop

If I were a bishop there would be none of that. I would prune down diocesan management to the barest, essential minimum and hand it over entirely to as few as feasible, competent, professional laity. I would also forsake all the purple trappings, pomp, ostentation and deference associated with episcopacy and possibly even appoint myself a mere residentiary canon, or curate of my cathedral, to give me more freedom to spend time out and about the parishes. My overriding goal and strategy would be to have a diocese with more priested parish churches than any in the land. Parish churches without a familiar and loved resident or near resident priest inevitably decline.

To this end I would foster vocations to the parish priesthood and regularly visit and pastor my serving parish priests while endeavouring to increase their number and quality as best I could. I would liaise with the theological colleges that are still in existence and visit them regularly to take their temperature, critique what they are up to and possibly head hunt the very best ordinands, particularly those with the brain, eloquence and zing to make sweet sense of the Faith to increasingly sceptical parishioners. At clergy gatherings and conferences I would emphasise that the most effective evangelism, in our inherited parochial system, arises out of baptisms, confirmations, weddings and especially funerals, when performed sympathetically and confidently by a well known and well loved parish priest.

Inclusive

I would not be amalgamating parishes, I would be endeavouring to return them to smaller benefices. The term "mega-church" would be absent from my vocabulary, other denominations do all the expressions of that sort of faith better than we do. What is unique about the Church of England is the parochial system, priested by men and women who are open-minded, accepting of and empathetic to the churched and unchurched, believers and unbelievers, saints and sinners and members of other denominations and faiths. Everyone should be encouraged and able to acknowledge the local priest as "theirs". Lay ministers, if adequately trained, would be ordained and encouraged into full time priesting as soon as they were free to do so. 'House for Duty' parish priests and non-stipendiary parish priests would be sought out, encouraged, cherished and admired. Vacant vicarages would not be sold, they would be hoarded for future priestly occupancy.

The Diocese of Bath and Wells has 560 churches, 463 parishes and only 192 full time stipendiary parochial clergy. To continue amalgamating parishes and cutting down on parish priests seems suicidal. I would want to double the number of full time clergy, be they stipendiary or otherwise.

Wise advice? Possibly, but cloud cuckoo land advice too, unless many more bishops are consecrated, to be team vicars and placed in vicarages rather than palaces to devalue the episcopal currency to a more lowly, effective and appropriate 'bottom of the table' status.

Pacific oysters and goannas

Last Monday, dog-collared, cassocked and lanyarded, I was ambling up and down the Cathedral about my business as a "Day Chaplain". I had affable conversations with all sorts of good folk including one enthusiastic and voluble spiritualist who misinterpreted my attentiveness as readiness to be converted to his way of thinking. An encounter with a couple from Merimbula in Australia, led to some happy reminiscing to do with the large and luscious Pacific oysters farmed in the tidal lagoon there and encounters in its coastal woodland with huge tree goannas, (lace monitor lizards). They grow to a length of two metres and are aggressively carnivorous, feeding on other reptiles, birds, eggs and mammals. The females lay 6 to 12 eggs in a hole dug into the side of a termite mound. The termites rebuild the mound over the eggs, keeping them safe and at a steady 30 degree celsius. When the young hatch, 8 to 9 months later, the female returns to dig them out.

As well as from Australia there were folk visiting the cathedral from Staffordshire, Lancashire, Essex, Kent, South Carolina and Germany, all priest-friendly and responsive. Oddly, two totally different people, at different times, asked me if I was the Bishop. How radiant with wit and wisdom I must have seemed.

(553) “This and That” - 16 June 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Old fogeys fortunate enough to have been brought up in a loving family not blighted by extreme poverty, look back fondly on the world of the 1940s and 1950s. It’s a world now long gone and much deplored and deprecated these days, justifiably so, in many ways.

The Rhodesia I grew up in, loved and still regard as God’s own country was tainted, as indeed was I myself, by racism, chauvinism, bigotry and narrow-mindedness. How blinkered we were and yet how blessed as well. I am grateful for having been granted a temperament that prefers counting blessings to enumerating curses.

Diddly Squat

The daily walk

One of the blessings of my daily early morning routine is the *Farming Today* quarter hour on the BBC. I worked on a farm as a student and have lived much of my life in country settings. Farming fascinates me and I love the cow muck and urine scent of old fashioned farmyards. The first half of one of our most favoured daily walks here in Wells, takes us alongside a hay meadow, two fields of burgeoning wheat, and an apple orchard, before a clamber over three styles to cross a pair of cow and calf cropped fields and then around the edge of a paddock that is just beginning to sprout maize.

We enjoy observing and discussing the progress, condition and health of the crops and delight in the curiosity of the calves and the lumbering motherliness of the cows. It is hardly surprising then, that we choose to watch Jeremy Clarkson’s ham-fisted, but entertaining *Diddly Squat* farming antics on televison, though we regret the show’s unnecessary and gratuitous coarseness of language. It reflects a general coarsening of both public and private discourse that has edged its way even into my own conversation. I look back fondly to better and more verbally inhibited days and times.

How softly Eros walked in the nineteenth century

The much vaunted freedom in matters relational and sexual that was heralded by the lifting of the Lady Chatterley ban and enable by the contraceptive pill has been a boon and blessing in many, manys ways, but there is a downside. It has blinded us to much that was valuable and lovely in the past, as this wondrous poem by *Lisel Mueller* (1924–2020) delicately suggests:

Romantics

Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann
The modern biographers worry
“how far it went,” their tender friendship.
They wonder just what it means
when he writes he thinks of her constantly,
his guardian angel, beloved friend.
The modern biographers ask
the rude, irrelevant question
of our age, as if the event
of two bodies meshing together
establishes the degree of love,
forgetting how softly Eros walked
in the nineteenth century, how a hand
held overlong or a gaze anchored
in someone's eyes could unseat a heart,
and nuances of address, not known
in our egalitarian language
could make the redolent air
tremble and shimmer with the heat
of possibility. Each time I hear
the *Intermezzi*, sad
and lavish in their tenderness,
I imagine the two of them
sitting in a garden
among late-blooming roses
and dark cascades of leaves,
letting the landscape speak for them,
leaving nothing to overhear.

St Mary's Croscombe

The shrinking Anglican world

The Anglican world is shrinking and in decline. There are blessings in this too because, if nothing else, it helps makes connections more transparent and networking easier.

Last Sunday Diana and I worshipped in the Church of the Blessed Virgin, Croscombe, a village three miles along the road from Wells to Shepton Mallet. Its Benefice is without a Vicar at present and so I took the service, which was enjoyable for its parish church intimacy as a contrast to our more usual and much appreciated cathedral Sunday worship. In the sermon I mentioned an old Tristan man who was asked why it was that he, along with the majority of the islanders evacuated to England on the eruption of the island's volcano in 1961, elected to return. He replied: "Because I can't hear the voice of God in England."

In the small congregation of this lovely but insignificant Somerset village, there happened to be a retired priest who is a friend of a South African cleric whose surname is as unusual as my own and so unforgettable, Gregorowski. The name, though not the man himself, was familiar to me during my tempestuous days as a theological student at St Paul's College in Grahamstown, a cathedral city in South Africa's Eastern Cape. What is more, Diana remembered worshipping in his church and hearing him preach in Cape Town way back in 1987. He went on to become Bishop of Table Bay and as such had visited Tristan da Cunha more than once.

His father was an Anglican priest, as too is his brother Anthony, like myself a Grahamstown man, though a year or two before me. It was he whose name and reputation I encountered while there. The surname, they tell us, is a Polish translation of MacGregor and dates from the days when the MacGregors were wanted men in Scotland and so found refuge in many parts of Europe.

Donning the Dean's clobber

More connections have been revealed by the advent of the new Dean of Wells, Toby Wright, who is to be installed with much pomp and ceremony this Sunday, 16 June. Diana has been fitting his curtains to the Deanery windows and his cassock, alb and surplice to his body. I have been her curtain hanger and also her model for the vestments, well and truly pricked by pinned up hems while donning and doffing a dean's clobber. It's yet another mere, near brush with being Dean for me rather than actually becoming one. I've been the curate of a Cathedral, a Canon of two Cathedrals, the 'Vicar' of a Cathedral, but never an actual dean. It's a deprivation that doesn't devastate me.

The new Dean was trained at Mirfield and so is acquainted with a university friend of mine with whom I was ordained priest in Harare Cathedral in 1975. He is now a Mirfield monk and came to preach for us at Boldre on one of our "Africa Sundays". As it all these connections are not enough, Diana has friends who are good friends of the new Dean's mother and one of Diana's university friends has a daughter who is a friend of the new Dean's wife. Connections, connections, connections.

Transcending boundaries

As the Anglican world contracts and diminishes, it reveals itself ever more obviously to be a family that transcends the boundaries of village, town, city, county, country, continent, time and eternity.

Tricorne worn at William Gilpin Tercentenary Celebration at St John's Boldre

(552) "This and That" - 9 June 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

There are poems that instantly delight and intrigue. For example the fifth of Auden's seven *Bucolics,* entitled, *Islands.* It begins irresistibly:

Old saints on millstones float with cats
To islands out at sea
Whereon no female pelvis can
Threaten their agape.

That is the first stanza of what is a strange, cryptic, almost doggerel poem which, as it proceeds, needs a little ruminative digging before it becomes almost understandable. To someone fascinated by islands and who has lived on two of the world's most remote, the verse is particularly fascinating. How ingenious to describe being on an island's shore as on *a lake turned inside out...* and there's even a specific reference to St Helena in the fifth stanza:

His continental damage done,
Laid on an island shelf,
Napoleon has five years more
To talk about himself.

Discalced

Shaking hands with parishioners after church services is a pleasure that I miss now that I am retired. A creative and demanding skill, honed to an art over many years of parish priesting, it required fluent modesty and self deprecation when fielding compliments, sensitivity and empathy when being informed of dire illnesses or bereavements and a studied, insouciant magnanimity when facing criticism. Over and above all, however wit, humour, fluent repartee and banter elevated it to joyful heights.

One Sunday morning, in the first of my Australian parishes, I shook hand with a formidable lady who instead of bidding me *"Good morning",* or complimenting me on a fine sermon, declared abruptly: *"Your shoes are dirty!"* I thanked her, for it was a useful piece of information, a salutary reminder that when people receive Communion, unless they are of the soulful sort who insist on meeting your eye in a deep and meaningful gaze, see only the priest's shoes, which means that it's important to ensure that they don't distract by their dirtiness or peculiarity. In sandals on hot Australian sabbaths, toe nails need to be well manicured and possibly even painted in the appropriate liturgical colour for the season.

Liberation from Robin Island

In biblical times priests performed their duties in the temple barefoot. In my last Australian parish, at daily Eucharists in the well carpeted Lady Chapel I did likewise during summer. I love to get out of my shoes. Like Nelson Mandela freed from Robben Island gaol, my toes luxuriate in liberation from the close confinement of shoes which, because they are such dirty things, used always to be discarded before entering a holy place.

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

(Elizabeth Barret Browning)

The disciples of Jesus were instructed to shake off the dust from their feet as they left any place which refused to listen to them. This is what strict Jews would do when they arrived back in Palestine after travelling abroad. At the border they would take off their sandals and give them a good shake to be rid of any foreign dirt and filth clinging to them and so avoid contaminating the holy land of Israel.

Some time ago I came across a clever reversal of Jesus' famous saying: *"The point of `shaking the dust off your feet' is that, actually, you can't."* Nor can you, the dust on our shoes has to be rubbed and polished away, it can't be merely shaken off, more's the pity. The dust of discontent, despair and materialistic ennui is best rubbed and polished away by wholehearted Christian engagement and communal worship.

A negative emotion

After the Eucharist one day last week Diana and I walked up Chamberlain Street pulling two suitcases and a trolley. They contained four large and heavy curtains for the Deanery, which is sited on a pleasing but strangely named street, *The Liberty.* The curtains had been gracing our dining table for some days as Diana shortened them for the newly appointed Dean and his family. Because the pavement along the Cathedral Green is bumpy Diana pulled her suitcase along the road, leaving ample room for any car to pass. As one vehicle did so, its driver dropped her window and angrily ordered Diana to walk on the pavement. She mildly ignored the gratuitous advice and because I was well ahead and didn't witness the incident so did I. However, on being told about it and no stranger to bursts of 'road rage' myself, I busily composed a mild but altogether suitable response for such expostulations of frustrated fury: " *Madam, anger is such a destructive and negative emotion, do you think you need counselling? If so I can give you my card and we can make an appointment....."* A mobile phone could be taken out and a pretence at recording the exchange made, so as to forestall any legally actionable and even more enraged response.

Neglecting to change his tune

On Saturday the first of June we were back in Boldre for the tercentenary of the birth of an illustrious predecessor of mine as vicar of St John's, the remarkable William Gilpin (1724-1804). In the evening I delivered a talk on the enlightened educationalist, philanthropist, artist and parish priest, quoting extensively from his memoirs. These are written in the third person and so, to differentiate between his words and mine, I donned a fine and fetching tricorne hat whenever I quoted him and doffed it when I was speaking as myself. It proved both effective and amusing. Diana is as skilled a milliner as she is a curtain maker. I might well be seen around Wells these days sporting a fine black tricorne.

In bright, early morning sunshine on our Saturday in Boldre we went for a walk on New Forest heath land among clusters of delicate wild orchids and a profusion of foxgloves spears piercing the gorse. Best of all was an incessantly calling cuckoo, the only one we have heard this year and he did us proud. In June he's supposed to *"change his tune"*, but it was the first day of that month and he had forgotten to get round to doing so.

(551) “This and That” - 2 June 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Wells Cathedral with Glastonbury Tor in the background

To be able to slide or slip easily to sleep is a boon and blessing. During church services, when the intercessor rambles on interminably, how lovely to wake with a start at the word “Amen”. In the early morning quietude of the cathedral’s Lady Chapel, it is important not to do this with a prayer book on your lap because, as you slip into sleep, it’s likely to slide to the floor revealing your somnolence to one and all in so resonant a space.

Getting things off the chest

To be able to drift easily in and out of sleep during the night is also a great boon, though again, a degree of caution is advisable. A few nights ago, in bed asleep on my back, doubtless with my mouth open, I awoke with a dry throat and reached for my bedside mug of water. Once my throat had been irrigated I drifted back into sleep immediately, only to be awakened by a trickle of cold water pooling onto my chest and then running down my side to the sheet. Sleep had reasserted itself before I had even returned my mug of water to the bedside table. It reminded me of Coleridge’s masterpiece, *The Ballad of 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.

The silly buckets on the deck,
That had so long remained,
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;
And when I awoke, it rained.

It brought back to mind too an aged and eccentric priest and colleague on the staff of Salisbury Cathedral in Rhodesia. I spotted him one morning with a mouse trap he had just purchased and asked him why. He told me that he had woken that morning to find a mouse sitting contentedly on his chest nibbling a half Marie biscuit that he had fallen asleep eating the night before.

Impertinent journalese

To possess a large digital archive of your articles, journals, sermons and ramblings is both disturbing and reassuring. Disturbing because it reveals just how poor and even gauche the quality of your writing and thinking was and indeed sometimes still is.

In my very first parish, long before I went digital, there was a remarkable parishioner called Noel Brettell (1908-1991). He had been a notable and imaginative headmaster of a country primary school in central Mashonaland until, with his wife Eva, he retired to the beautiful eastern districts of Rhodesia. After some years their home was attacked and destroyed by insurgents, as the increasingly violent and brutal civil war intensified, driving them permanently from their beloved Garden of Eden. With no trace of bitterness they settled in my parish of Gatooma, where their son and his family happened to live. Noel was a polished prose stylist, talented water colourist, devoted and knowledgeable bird watcher, fine poet, practising Christian and the most unassuming and modest of men. He had graduated with a first-class honours Degree in English at the University of Birmingham where he published his earlier

poems in the University Gazette. I admired him enormously, not least for accurately characterising my writing style in those days as "*impertinent journalese*", nor has it much changed for the better. As he shook my hand after church one Sunday he cryptically commented on what had been one of my better sermons *"bright shoots of everlastingness....."* expecting me to recognise the quotation. I couldn't, but it turned out to be a revelation, for it is a line in what has become one of my all time favourite poems: Henry Vaughan's *The Retreate.*

"Rubbish, bloody rubbish!"

My large digital archive is reassuring as well as disturbing, because it reveals that I remain all of a piece with the young man I used to be. Liturgically conservative all those years ago, I remain so, though a tad more tolerant perhaps. Relatively theologically liberal these days, it is good to discover that all those years ago I was too. Right from the start, in the late nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties, truth was as important to me as orthodoxy. Unlike Tertullian I couldn't and wouldn't "*believe because it is impossible*" (*Credo quia absurdum*). Impossible to prove, yes, of course, but impossible to believe no. Always then, from the beginning there's been a compulsion to make sense of the Church's faith, to fathom its coherence and interpret and preach its doctrines and dogmas accordingly, rather than merely assert or parrot them.

If nothing else this has meant that in sermons, if not always in articles and conversation, it is to myself, first and foremost that I am attempting to make sense of things. I like to think that this has helped protect me from *de haut en bas,* condescending pontification, though another thoughtful, doughty and all but agnostic Scots parishioner in Gatooma once commented: *I liked the first half of your sermon, Andrew, but the second half, man it was rubbish, bloody rubbish!* He was almost certainly right.

Noel Brettell's wife Eva was killed when their car was rammed by a bus in Gatooma a couple of years after I had left the parish to go to St Helena. Here is a lovely, lovely "Good night" he wrote for her:

NOCTURNE

For my wife

Our windows answer to the west:
Responding to their flash of flame,
We set the kindling to our hearth
And sit with books, the old, the same

That peer in gilt upon our shelves,
Companions of our five decades;
With fire and lamp the shadow-show
From floor to cornice flickers, fades,

Fades, recovers, pauses still,
With mow and gesture, silhouette—
Remembered joys with sharpness limned
Of some still unassuaged regret.

And down the shady holloways,
Sharp and poignant, high and shrill,
Voices of children, grown to manhood,
Have lasted, and are with us still,

Inform the many-gloried moments
That we have glimpsed so many a time,
When love elides into a song
And living mates itself with rhyme.

So we may have, by Lethe's beach,
Beyond the oil-slick on the flow,
So many stanzas to the song
That Charon will forget to row.

Discounting what the years have filched
With blur of scene and slip of name,
We have had many lives, my love,
But only one that death can claim.

(550) "This and That" - 26 May 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

A wall in Wells, Somerset

Bertrand Russel, a notable public intellectual and atheist held some decidedly wacky views, but also wise ones. He suggested once that *" the fundamental cause of trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt".*

The Uncertainty Principle

I think he is right. It might well explain why, as a parish priest, I have had far more trouble from those who are certain than from those who are doubtful. There is an aphorism dear to my heart which makes a point I like to argue: *"the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty".*

In the late 1970s, during my first incumbency in Rhodesia, I was frequently challenged by a group of "charismatics" whose members maintained that God spoke to them directly. He did so by way of the "*gift of tongues*" supernaturally interpreted by fellow worshippers. When"*Spirit directed*" like this they were endowed with a rock solid certitude that brooked no argument or questioning.

There are biblical literalists who are impossible to argue with too. Instead of an infallible Pope they have an infallible Bible. If the good book had happened to say that it was not the whale who swallowed Jonah, but Jonah who swallowed the whale, then that would be so. It would indeed have been Jonah who swallowed the whale.

Too liberal a use of dope

The desire for certainty is grounded in insecurity and fear. To be absolutely certain of God, or of God's will or of what is right, justifies the total dismissal of anyone with the temerity to oppose you. From such certainty comes persecution, war, inquisition, pogrom, suicide bombs and all the vileness associated with fanaticism.

Amicable discussion, debate and disagreement with those who are certain is impossible and futile. Entrenched beyond persuasion those who are certain defend their position to the bitter end. I had a friend at university whose latent schizophrenia was triggered into actuality by too liberal a use of dope. He used to visit me regularly when I was newly priested and I soon learned that to question the reality of the "devils" and "angels" that spoke to him from just behind my shoulder was futile. They were as real to him as they were unreal to me.

The foolishness of God

At its simplest and most basic level 'Faith' involves taking a step beyond where the evidence can take us. So there is always a possibility that we are mistaken, that we might need to modify our beliefs.

My own beliefs have evolved and been modified many times over the years. A particular guru of mine, the person who, in the 1970s, persuaded me of the wondrous good sense underlying the *"foolishness of God",* John Austin Baker, also impressed upon me how important it is for believers to follow Truth, even if, seemingly, it is away from God and Jesus of Nazareth. To give up on Truth is to lose everything, including Jesus of Nazareth, for he is *the Way, the Truth and the Life.*

Socrates

There are philosophers who claim that 'certainty' is not so much a property of statements as a property of people. It is an emotional state, like anger, jealousy, or embarrassment. When anyone maintains that it is certain that black equals white, what they really mean is merely "I am certain that black equals white".

Approaching Wells Cathedral

Socrates claimed to know nothing, maintaining that his wisdom was limited to an awareness of his own ignorance. That is more like it. Bertrand Russell too was soft on mysticism, not least because he once had a mystical experience himself which is probably why he sometimes defined himself as an agnostic rather than an atheist.

How glad I am to have been baptized into inclusive, tolerant Anglicanism, a form of the Faith I dearly love. I once celebrated it in an ironic, doggerelish fashion as printed below. It is the last stanza that I particularly like, though in a sense it doesn't quite chime with what I have been saying thus far:

FANATICS

1

Be they bible thumping brats,
Or incense-reeking sanctuary rats,
Fanatics ruin, wreck, besmirch
The quiet, temperate English Church.

2

Be they happy-clappy loons,
Or charismanic, joy buffoons,
Fanatics ruin, wreck, besmirch,
The laid back, lovely English Church.

3

The healing freaks, the rabble-rousers,
The kill-joy, puritanic wowsers,
When fanatical, besmirch
The tasteful, tranquil English Church.

4

The English Church, when most authentic,
Is dilly daft, absurd, eccentric,
But never, ever mono-manic,
A hint of which engenders panic.

5

The English Churchman's proper diet
Is peaceful, understated, quiet;
Allows for compromise and doubt,
Welcomes all, kicks no one out.

6

The English Church equivocates,
In long debates deliberates,
It tolerates, accommodates
Procrastinates and vacillates.

7

When violent, crude fanaticism
Rises up to threaten schism
And tempts a similar reaction,
Of outrage, bigotry and faction,

8

It's only fools, which we are not,
Retaliate as blood runs hot,
Who mock and fight and rant and roar,
Which merely brings them back for more.

9

Instead, the truly English way
Lets fanatics have their say,
Disdains to fight, with well bred hauteur,
And drowns the fools in milk and water.

(549) "This and That" - 19 May 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

The Quire & Organ - Wells Cathedral

Choral Evensong at Wells has its surprises. A week or so ago the choir and organ were joined by a young girl on the saxophone. I think she's one of the Cathedral School's many, remarkable, virtuoso instrumentalists.

The saxophone is not my favourite instrument, nor was the music chosen entirely to my taste, but how lovely it was. The most mellow of mellow saxophones imparted a heart-stopping poignancy to the psalm and then with bouncing agility and sprightliness added sparkle and glitter to the chosen anthem. Glorious and beloved Evensong.

Confusing the 'sciencey' mind

The Church of England has bequeathed us two wondrous and not unrelated gifts. The first is daily Choral Evensong as sung in Cathedrals, University College Chapels and some parish churches. The second is the Parish System itself, which used to ensure that every community in the land was served by a parish church, dear to the hearts of one and all, believers or not. The vicar or curate attached was granted pastoral oversight of one and all, believers or not. Economic rationalist bishops and administrators are gradually undoing this wonder. A parishioner in Boldre once told me how she loved to pop in to St John's church during the week to say a prayer "*to the God I don't believe in.*" I loved her for that. The boundary between belief and unbelief and between Church and World is blurred. Theo Hobson in a recent article makes the point:

> *The distinction between a believing Christian and a cultural Christian is dubious, because religion is culture. Belief is not, or not just, an invisible thing in one's head – it takes the form of culture. A lot of people are not sure if they believe, or are not sure how to articulate their half-belief, but sometimes take part in Christian worship – even if it's just singing the occasional carol, as Richard Dawkins himself enjoys doing. Dawkins wants to categorise such people as merely cultural Christians, like him, not believing ones. But there is no clear distinction. In Dawkins' view, it is harmless and even healthy to participate in Christian culture a little bit, for there is a 'beauty' and 'decency' to it, but it is deeply mistaken to cross the line into 'belief'. But there wouldn't be any Christian culture if there weren't plenty of committed believers, and there is no clear line between mild participation and tentative belief. In practice, someone who values Christian culture, and sometimes dips a toe in, and is more nuanced and honest than Dawkins, often admits to believing a bit too. I'm sorry if it confuses the sciencey mind, but religious belief just isn't black and white.*

A strange pommie habit

Like many young men brought up in the arms of mother Church, I drifted away from full-blown belief in God for a while. Early in 1971 I flew into London from Rhodesia, skint and friendless, intending to sign up as a supply teacher to earn some money. Because there was a bitter postal strike in

process, public phones were jammed and no letters could be sent or received. This meant that I couldn't have my degree and teaching qualifications verified and approved because the education authorities had been decentralised to outlandish places like Cardiff and Durham.

I managed to find digs in Chiswick with a delightful Roman Catholic lady prepared to give me credit, but with some strange pommie habits like turning off the hot water geyser for the whole of summer. Wandering around Chiswick on a cold, grey February evening, I drifted into the parish church on the banks of the Thames to look around and as I did so there was a bang, a cough and an old priest with white hair and in a black cloak stomped in followed by a nun. They flopped down and the priest said six magical and musical words: *"O Lord open thou our lips....."* They opened my heart, I too flopped down and let the familiar words wash over me. I was at home in a strange land. *"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land..."* asks the psalmist? We can, I discovered. It was the beginning of my return to full belief.

Fret not thyself

Some weeks later I wandered into Westminster Abbey and a verger asked me if I had come to attend Evensong. I hadn't, but said that I would like to and so was ushered into the ancient choir and sat down on one of the miserichorded seats, smoothed and polished by centuries of backsides. The choir filed in and a light English tenor voice sang: *O Lord open thou our lips....* The psalm, sung antiphonally to perfection, began: *Fret not thyself because of the ungodly*..... It was one of the most significant acts of worship in my life, part of an inexorable current directing me to priesthood.

Explaining Human Castration

There are other and very different memories of Evensong. On holiday from boarding school in Rhodesia it was recited with my parents, brother and sister, sometimes in our home, but more usually in the Mission Station's Church with an African catechist called Lucien. He read the lessons in an accent too thick to comprehend and once, when my Father was away on a trek to mission outstations, the lectionary directed Lucien to read the New Testament story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The word 'eunuch' came out as 'engy' and after the service, to my mother's horror, Lucien asked, *"Mai"* (Mother) *"What is this word 'engy'"?* I can't remember how my mother explained the word, only her horror at being called upon to explain human castration to an African peasant.

Let All the World in Every Corner Sing

My love of Evensong is rooted in my past, then. Evensong said as tropical rain drowned it out on a tin roof. Evensong said as turtle doves crooned incessantly in late afternoon heat. Evensong on sundays with hymns sung by African school boys in harmony that shivered my bone timbers. Evensong said in the cathedral Chapel on the Island of St Helena with the Bishop's belly rumbling like a motor bike from the pew in front. Evensong sung on St Helenian Sunday evenings with Charlie Yon belting out a tenor line with fervent gusto. Evensong said in home, in bed, in tent, in car. Evensong said on aeroplane, and train. Evensong in bush church, in cathedral, in abbey. Evensong in all Saints Margaret Street in London, St John's Boldre and now in Wells Cathedral.

Evensong is a part of me. I've been bored witless saying it at times, have fantasised and dreamed my way through it at others, I have sometimes resented it and even ducked it. Here in Wells I sometimes fall asleep, but how I love it. *The peace of God, which passes all understanding* settles upon and around me as I sit down and wait for the choir to be led in.

It has taught me that what I feel when I worship, is irrelevant, because the worship of the Church flows on whether I am there or not, whether I feel pious, moved or not. Simply by attending one slips into its river and is carried along for three quarters of an hour, to slip out again refreshed and renewed, whether one recognises the fact or not.

(548) “This and That” - 12 May 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Distant view - Wells Cathedral

When out and about and if they wish, Church of England parsons can be identified by the slipped halo known as a dog collar. Originally these were made of cloth or linen, but nowadays are nearly always composed of deplorable plastic. Nor do they have a long and illustrious pedigree. They were invented in gloomy Glasgow by a Presbyterian minister as recently as 1865.

A marlinspike

Parsons of a parsimonious bent make their own dog collars by cutting the required shape and length from any white plastic bottle that happens to be hanging around the vicarage. If the bottle used to contain household bleach they wander around in a miasma of chlorine rather than an odour of sanctity.

I rarely wear a dog collar these days. Not because I am ashamed of my profession, but because I am retired. Last Monday I walked up Chamberlain Street to the Cathedral with a more secular means of identification around my neck, a lanyard, which is a good and romantic word with a far longer and more interesting pedigree than a mere dog collar. I whistled as I walked, imagining myself to be a boatswain with a marlinspike hanging from my lanyard to help me splice or unspliced the rigging ropes of a galleon. In reality there was just a miserable little plastic card dangling from the thing, adorned with a grim faced photograph of myself and the word “Volunteer “ in large print, “Wells Cathedral” in medium sized print, “Andrew Neaum” in small and heavy print and “Chaplain” in small and light print. Over my arm was a cassock with a bit of bottle-plastic dog collar peeping from its bespoke and snug little neck niche. I was on my way to be a cathedral “Day Chaplain” from 11.00am to 3.00pm.

It was bank holiday Monday and so there were visitors aplenty queuing to enter the first built and loveliest of all England’s entirely Gothic cathedrals. On my arrival the lanyard’s purple ribbon was as identifiable and reverentially acknowledged as a bishop’s purple shirt, I was cheerily waved past the queue to enter the cloisters and open an ancient door into the small Volunteer’s room. There I donned my cassock, slipped the white plastic dog collar snippet across the front of my neck, signed myself in and reassured myself that there was a lunch voucher worth £10.50 to present to the Cathedral’s *Loft Café* at an appropriate time. I then ventured forth with a swirl and flourish to find one of the cathedral ‘*virgers*’ to fit a microphone to my person.

Wand waving virgers

The team of five Cathedral *virgers* do as much, if not more, than anyone else to keep the Cathedral running smoothly and well. They know every corner of the building, are constantly moving, arranging and rearranging chairs for concerts and functions of one sort or another, solving problems and fielding innumerable queries. They open and shut the Cathedral each day and one or other of them attends and serves at the daily Eucharist we attend, as well as pretty well all other services. Their room opens onto the north aisle of the nave, alongside the chantry chapel that flanks the main altar, and it is the physical, material, practical and electronic hub of the vast building. All five of them are the most genial, knowledgeable and helpful of people.

The title “verger” or “virger” is derived from the ceremonial rod they carry when leading processions, which is called a *virge* (from the Latin *virga*, “branch, staff, rod”). In ancient times the *virge* would have been used to hold back animals or over-enthusiastic crowds and to control unruly

choristers. My first three years as a deacon and priest were spent on the staff of All Saint's Cathedral, Salisbury (now Harare). It was a large and hugely busy place of worship in the very centre of a vibrant, bustling city and I remember being led from my stall to the pulpit by a *virge*-bearing verger (not a *virger* in that cathedral) and feeling a little uncomfortable at being pulpit-placed so ceremoniously. I would have preferred to sidle up apologetically on my own. The verger was a delightful old man called Stan Hanscombe, now long gone to God. May he rest in peace, but be granted, in that peace, an extra frisson of spiritual joy at being remembered 12½ thousand miles away from his mortal remains on earth, 45 years after I last conversed with him.

Meeting an MI5 operative

The role of a Day Chaplain, simply put, is "to provide spiritual and pastoral care for visitors to the Cathedral". It is a rewarding and enjoyable task, but also tiring because much of the time is spent ambling the length, breadth and width of the building and smiling at visitors. Most of them smile in return, some engage you in conversation while a very few studiously avoid eye contact. Anyone who asks for touristy guidance is directed to an on duty member of the large and knowledgeable team of volunteer guides. Those who approach me for a chat, or to unburden themselves, or to pass an opinion on mother Church, be it positive or negative, or to ask for a prayer I respond to. Last Monday, among those I talked to, were a couple of artists. The first showed me a picture he'd drawn while sitting in the cathedral and engaged me in conversation about the state of the world. The other told me that he was a pantheist, but loved the building and the Christian faith and we found much common ground as we tried to recall passages of verse from William Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth. Another encounter was with a voluble visitor who told me that he'd once saved the late Queen's life, as her bodyguard, by taking a bullet meant for her and who claimed not only to belong to MI 5, but also to have been secretly knighted for his service to the crown and nation.

Quarter Jack

On the hour, visitors tend to gather beneath the medieval clock in the north transept to watch Quarter Jack kick the chime and hammer the hour as knights on horses go round and round and round. After this, before people disperse, the Day Chaplain asks everyone to be still for a moment to share a very brief prayer followed by the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer.

The Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1684-1711 was the godly Thomas Ken. He wrote a couple of my favourite hymns: *Awake my soul and with the sun....* and *Glory to Thee my God this night.* He also wrote prayers, among them the following that articulates something of what all we Cathedral Volunteers are attempting to ensure:

Undercroft door - Wells Cathedral

O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, and a heavenly Father's care; and narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and hate. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged enough to turn back the tempter's power: make it a gateway to thine eternal kingdom. ***Amen.***

(547) “This and That” - 5 May 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Peace Dove installation - Wells Cathedral

In lighthearted moments even the best of poets can stoop to doggerel and the composition of limericks, bawdy or otherwise. Auden’s enjoyable *Doggerel by a Senior Citizen* is fine example and his bawdy limerick that begins: *The Bishop elect of Hong Kong....* come to mind too. Rudyard Kipling has bequeathed us this:

There was a small boy of Quebec,
Who was buried in snow to his neck;
When they said. “Are you friz?”
He replied, “Yes, I is—
But we don't call this cold in Quebec.”

The word limerick is thought to come from an 18th-century Irish folk song called *“Will You Come Up to Limerick?”* during which singers were wont to add ever more nonsensical lyrics as they sang. The five-line poems now called limericks were sometimes sung to the same tune as the folk song, hence the name.

I myself am a dedicated doggerelist and occasionally turn my hand to limericks. The best risqué piece of verse I ever wrote is a parody of a song by Gilbert and Sullivan based upon an unlikely and ingenious pun. When I read it to Diana we all but rolled about on the floor laughing, but unfortunately it is tad too bawdy to share. It wouldn’t offend most of my past parishioners or any of my best friends, but those who prefer parsons to titter or giggle rather than to belly laugh need bearing in mind.

The best reason for getting married

A marriage without humour is unthinkable. Both my wives granted me the temerity and courage to propose marriage to them by laughing at my jokes and appreciating my attempts at humour. The rite for the “Solemnization of Matrimony”, in the old *Book of Common Prayer,* suggests three reasons for which God ordained marriage: first, the procreation of children; second, as a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication; third, for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. There are those who object to the absence of the word “love” in these reasons, but I object more to the absence of the word “laughter”. One of the best reasons for getting married is companionable hilarity, merriment and humour.

Mutton chops on the Isle of Wight

It is not easy to laugh on your own. What is funny when we are in solitude rarely flares into full blown laughter. It might raise a chuckle or a smile, but that is all, laughter needs laughter to laugh. The late columnist and historian Paul Johnson once wrote of Sir Herbert Spencer: He.....

“had no sense of humour at all. But he practised laughing, and developed a powerful chuckle which crescendoed into a roar. He also made jokes by way of experiment. He was once on holiday on the Isle of Wight with G.H. Lewes, who by then had taken on the weighty responsibility of being George Eliot’s lover. The two men were at lunch when Spencer said, ‘These mutton chops are very large for such a small island.’ He started to chuckle, and his chuckle was so peculiar that Lewes chuckled too. Then Spencer worked up to his roar, and Lewes found himself roaring too, and they slapped each other on the back and stamped their feet and roared and roared. They made so much noise that

George Eliot eventually appeared and said, 'What are you laughing about?' Lewes explained as best he could. George Eliot listened carefully, weighed the joke about the mutton chops in her mind, front, back, sideways and upside down, translated it into German and back again, Greek and Latin ditto, and finally pronounced, 'I don't think that is at all funny.' Then the men started to laugh again, and George Eliot retired to get on with Middlemarch."

Open-minded and therefore authentic Christians, tend to laugh a lot. Fanatics do not. It is important to keep laughing.

Giblets

Diana and I buy free range eggs because we like to think that all the infertile little embryonic embryos we so enjoy eating are the product of contentment. This is probably daft because it is hard to imagine that even with the freedom to range, existence as an egg producing bio-machine can ever be contented, though the Australorps we reared for eggs and meat on the Island of St Helena seemed a particularly contented lot. Be that as it may, whenever Diana and I revert happily to our childhood and slice off the cap of a soft-boiled egg, dip a teaspoon full of its bright yoke into peppered salt and relish it with a mouthful of well buttered bread, it does add to our sense of well being and joy if we know that the egg comes from free-range hens. We are typical fence-straddling Anglicans then, considering there to be something good about insisting on free range eggs, as well as possibly absurd. Hence my delight on the following from D J Enright's commonplace book "Interplay":

We like to give animals a run for their money before eating them..... Hence the popularity of free-range eggs and chickens. But a recent purchase from the supermarket carried a chilling story: "chicken reared with freedom to roam outdoors WITHOUT GIBLETS". Surely not much of a run?

Little Entry Lane, Wells

The foolishness of God

Thank God for a sense of the absurd, the daft, ironic, incongruous and funny. It keeps us going and reassures us that we are not fanatical because before we can become too obsessive about anything, we detect a whiff of the daft, shonky, idiotic, incongruous, ironic or funny, which calls it all into question and helps us to keep things in some sort of proportion.

Even on the question of God it is St Paul's notion of his foolishness, the "*foolishness of God*", that is most compelling of all. Atheists just don't get it. Po-faced literalists they want to explain the joke instead of enjoying it. You might be able to understand molecules by spying on them through a microscope, but not jokes. Jokes are understood, appreciated and taken to heart in a flash of insight, in that spontaneous burst of laughter when the point is seen.

Don't for a minute think that I am not serious about God though. Of course I am. Absurdly so. The joke is that God exists.

(546) "This and That" - 28 April 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Young short-tailed shearwater

Tasmania's mutton birds (short-tailed shearwaters) return from waters around the Aleutian Islands to their nesting burrow homes after a journey of about 10,000 miles. Their pleasure on arrival is surely as joyful as was ours on arriving home from Tasmania after a journey of 11,000 miles.

Reincarnation as a short-tailed shearwater

When my children were young, we holidayed for a number of years close to several mutton bird colonies on the south coast of the Australian mainland. On the night before we returned home it became our custom, as darkness fell, to buy fish and chips to eat in the tussock clumps of one such colony and watch the parent birds drop silently out of the sky and scramble and scuttle towards and down their burrows. The smell of sea bird colonies is pungent, unforgettable and to me, wondrous.

Reincarnation as a mutton bird would suit me well as I have always wanted to visit the Aleutian Islands. They are among the gloomiest places on earth, their weather characterised by persistent cloud cover, strong winds and violent storms. There is measurable rain or snowfall on Adak Island, the southernmost part of Alaska, for 340 days of the year. Its latitude (51°47'N) is almost the same as Wells (51°21'N), but its average annual precipitation of 54.8 inches is rather less than the 66.18 inches of Tristan da Cunha, my much loved home for three and a half years as a child.

Incidentally, in Wells we have had 18.07 inches of rain so far this year. If it continues to fall at the same rate the year's total will be 54.21 inches, much the same as Alaska's Adak island.

Home, to a mutton bird, is a two to three foot long burrow, casually lined at the end with leaf litter and yet with sufficient pull to call parent birds 10,000 miles back home. Our home in Wells has a similar pull, and how happy we are to be back. *"To be happy at home,"* said Samuel Johnson, *"is the ultimate result of all ambition, the end to which every enterprise and labour tends, and of which every desire prompts the prosecution".* Indeed.

A joyous shot at how things ought to be

I love the sentimental tune to the even more sentimental words of the song *Home Sweet Home,* though only when it is sung by a voice without the trace of a wobble. The tune was written by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop (1787–1856), the first composer ever to be knighted and who, although very popular in his day, died in poverty. The words are from the libretto of an opera, set to music by Bishop and written by an American, John Howard Payne (1791–1852). Sentimentality doesn't really do justice to all that "home" is and means though. It takes the acute observation and concise genius of Philip Larkin to do that:

Home is so Sad

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft
And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

I love the line: *a joyous shot at how things ought to be* and I give an emphatic "yes" too, to ....*the piano stool,* because a few weeks ago in Hobart I sat once more upon a piano stool on which I had regularly perched a single buttock many years ago to encouraged my own children to practise pieces by *Johan Vanhal*, which I loved and by *Modest Mussorgsky* which I didn't. This time it was with two of my granddaughters. Their house in Hobart has many pieces from the home dismantled and abandoned to

take on the parish of Boldre in 2013: a piano and stool, pictures on the wall, ornaments, cutlery, a grandfather clock and much more. It was lovely to be reacquainted, but they gave the heart a wrench or two as well.

Boltholes and places of refuge

I look back with pleasure and gratitude to the homes that have been mine over the years. They were havens, boltholes, places of refuge and a space in which to kick off my shoes, drop my guard and be myself.

The first I can remember was a large vicarage in rural Staffordshire, it had a glass roofed, wisteria- draped verandah, a warm and much lived-in kitchen and outside, a croquet lawn and some old stables which were used by my father to hang and smoke bacon.

The second was a small wooden bungalow in a gully just fifty yards from the wild South Atlantic Ocean on Tristan da Cunha, shared with scuttling rats in the loft. It had a small paraffin powered refrigerator and a box bench on the veranda into which I liked to clamber, close the top and in the dark admire the illuminated figures on my first ever timepiece: a Canadian-made Zobo pocket watch. These were bought in job lots by my father. There was also a small workshop where he made toy ships for my brother and me, as well as fine oak altar rails for the island's church, which I was called upon to sandpaper. As the sea roared, the wind howled and the rain fell, how cosy this shack of a vicarage was, especially after my father built a stone chimney for an open fire in its small sitting room.

Homes in the African bush

Our next home was a corrugate iron roofed bungalow in the Rhodesian bush with an outside hot water system fired by logs in a brick kiln encompassing two 44 gallon drums of water, piped in cold and piped out hot. There were leopard inhabited and baboon infested kopjes all around and in the garden gaudy zinnias and thorny, pink flowered "crown of thorn" plants. The small verandah was shaded by a msasa tree in which I discovered the nest of a yellow vented bulbul with pink, heavily scrolled eggs, soon to be the secure and well loved "home" of four hungry chicks.

The next home we built ourselves, with the help and guidance of an African builder, on a new mission station in the Rhodesian bush. It was on top of a rocky hill above a small river that contained otters as well as whiskered, unappetising barbel and the disease bilharzia, second only to malaria as the most devastating of parasitic tropical plagues. The house was built with home made and kilned bricks on a concrete base and floor and was roofed with asbestos. My father was fed up with primitive hot water systems and so his built-on-the-cheap African mission house contained an anthracite burning Aga to supply us with reliable hot water and in which my mother cooked delicious bread.

Wine Glass Bay, Tasmania

The final home

Since then home has been a suburban Rhodesian rectory, two London bedsitters, a college room in South Africa, an African city flat, followed by rectories and vicarages here there and everywhere until now, here in Wells, I am happily ensconced in a house Diana and I own and love to bits. With a bit of luck I shall revel in this home until obliged to swap it for the six-foot box that is the antechamber or narthex to a heavenly home of homes.

(545) “This and That” - 21 April 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Back behind the Balustrade

A mere five days after arriving back home to the city of Wells from Tasmania we’ve abandoned it once more for family reasons and are temporary residents of Grayshott in Hampshire, right on its border with Surrey.

My daughter Rachel, husband Tom and two year old James have recently moved here and as Rachel is on the verge of giving birth to their second child, we’ve come to help. It is fun, but preoccupied with cooking meals, child-minding “this and that” allows little time or inclination to write about it and so instead I have mined my archive and come up with what follows, written 20 years ago for a now defunct national church journal in Australia.

A POVRE PERSOUN OF A TOUN

One of my colleagues told me recently of how, when he was a newly ordained though elderly deacon attending his first diocesan conference, he encountered his relatively young Archdeacon in that most levelling and egalitarian of meeting places the toilets. In a friendly fashion he passed a comment referring to the Archdeacon by his Christian name. The Archdeacon gave him a stony look and said, “*Father* to you. Only my friends call me by my Christian name.”

Sailing on the Derwent estuary: Tasmania

What's In A Name?

I can’t say that I have ever much cared what people call me, so long as it has not been too crudely insulting. People I encounter round and about refer to me as their *minister, vicar, rector, pastor o*r padre and some call me *Mister,* some *Father* and some *Andrew.* All these terms are accurate enough to be acceptable, though most of them reveal rather more about the user and his relationship to church and churchmanship than they do about the parson they describe.

Parson's Pedigree

I’ve a particular fondness for the word *parson,* rooted, I suspect, in its pedigree. The word goes back a long way and as a term for a clergyman is distinctly English. Chaucer’s “poor Parson” in the *Canterbury Tales* kicks the word off to a perfect start:

Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,
Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,
In sickness or in grief, to pay a call
On the remotest, whether great or small.....

He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,
No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.
Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore
He taught, but followed it himself before.

Strutting Clergymen

At my Induction to the parish of Wodonga recently, Bishop Paul Richardson dwelt upon the word’s worth in his homily. It derives from a word meaning no more than *person.* To be conscious of this derivation helps counter any tendency on the part of those mere persons who happen to be parsons

to strut or lord it over their fellow persons in the pew, a too common failing among the clergy. However, my etymological dictionary informs me that the late Latin word *persona*, from which the word derives, was in fact applied to "rank" or "dignity" and so it is best to push the pedigree back no further than Chaucer.

The Bishop's Hovel

Those we value we place upon a pedestal which too readily comes to be mistaken for a throne. Being something of a high churchman I value bishops highly, but surely their shirts and cassocks would make more symbolic sense if they were the colour and texture of sack-cloth rather than imperial purple, and should not their residences more closely approximate to, or at least be better termed a *shack* or a *hovel* rather than a *palace*?

The title *My Lord* for a bishop sticks in the craw to such an extent I can never ever bring myself to use it. "I come among you as one who serves..." said Jesus, a far better appellation for his latter day apostles would, surely, be *My Servant.*

Rag-Tag-And-Bobtail

The most necessary and yet probably the most difficult task of bishops is to ensure that their diocese is filled with thriving parishes. More important than diocesan programmes, schemes, conferences, liturgies or anything else, is to place in every rectory or vicarage in their diocese a mere parson. Someone who can readily, naturally and happily identify with all the mere persons in or out of the pew, as did Jesus of Nazareth with all and sundry in Palestine and does today in bread and wine. Each rectory needs a parson something like Chaucer's 'poor parson', who stands out as so authentic, lovable, loving and lovely among the multifarious, bawdy, colourful, devout, rag-tag-and-bobtail company of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury so long ago.....

He much disliked extorting tithe or fee,
Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt
Giving to poor parishioners round about
From his own goods and Easter offerings.
He found sufficiency in little things...

(Except for the title, all the Chaucer quotations come from Nevill Coghill's modern English version of the Canterbury Tales)

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Autumn colours: Tasmania

(544) “This and That” - 14 April 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Back behind the Balustrade

Tasmania: Seven Mile Beach Rainbow

It was long-john and corduroy trouser weather when we landed at Heathrow at around noon last Tuesday. We were told by the aircraft’s captain that the temperature outside was a mere 8° centigrade and indeed it felt like it.

England’s cold, wet and grey spring welcome couldn’t match Hobart’s benign autumn farewell. Not long before we left we walked along the lovely and empty *Seven Mile Beach* barefoot and sun-protected, though winter was tentatively edging its way in and the first good fall of rain in months promised to green up a drought weary landscape.

A garden, a Lady chapel and music

From the coach window, on the way to Guildford and our car, the verdancy of England gladdened our hearts and back in our beloved, postage stamp of a walled garden in Wells, gloriously gaudy tulips were hanging on for our return, still blowsily ablaze. Forget-me-nots frothed the sides of the paths, the abutalon was beginning to flower and a dazzling white camellia and colourful wallflowers cocked a snook at the wettest of wet springs.

Early the next morning we were back in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral. Its wondrous, stain-glassed, gothic-vaulted octagon of mere space settled down, upon and around us, as word and gesture and bread and wine declared sacrificing love to be life’s *raison d’etre* and heaven’s *modus operandi*.

I am listening to Haydn’s symphonies as I write. Many of the slow movements are as heart-breakingly lovely as the Lady Chapel. Both fill me with peace and gratitude for my existence and the dearly loving and beloved family and friends who gave us so rewarding a holiday with them. How wonderfully mysterious and intriguing is human existence:

Overtones

I heard a bird at break of day
Sing from the autumn trees
A song so mystical and calm,
So full of certainties,
No man, I think, could listen long
Except upon his knees.
Yet this was but a simple bird,
Alone, among dead trees.

William Alexander Percy 1885-1942

Guzzling ortolans

We flew out of Hobart at midday on Monday, spent six hours at Sydney airport reading, dozing and eating homemade cheese and avocado sandwiches. We did the same for three and a quarter hours in Dubai and arrived at Heathrow, stuffed with aeroplane food, at twelve thirty on Tuesday, a trouble-free journey of 11,494 miles behind us.

Of the films we watched en route only one is worth commending, a French delight with English subtitles called *The Taste of Things.* Utterly absorbing and heart-warming it’s about a 19th-century

French cook and her gourmand employer and while fascinatingly detailed on classic French cooking and eating, it is also deeply and subtly moving. A Guardian reviewer writes: ".....*Cinema tends to be fascinated by the high-stakes drama and intensity of new love or the brutal evisceration of its final moments. Far fewer films explore the comfortable familiarity of a love that has endured and deepened over decades. Vanishingly rare are pictures that capture this kind of relationship so satisfyingly."*

Holy Trinity, Kalk Bay

The first church service we attended was in Holy Trinity, Kalk Bay, a beautifully sited, thatched roof church on the False Bay side of the Cape peninsular and dear to my heart. In 1982 Kalk Bay's Rector and parish provided my family and me with free accommodation in one of their holiday cottages next door to the church. We were on our way to St Helena and waiting for berths to be found on the tiny 12 passenger and 12 crew tub of a ship that eventually replaced the Falklands War requisitioned vessel upon which we we were booked. Some years later Holy Trinity Kalk Bay became the much loved parish church of my sister Sue and her husband Bob who eventually became one of its genial and hard working churchwardens. Sue's ashes are interred in the garden overlooking False Bay.

The service we attended this time was comfortingly Anglican burdened by a too long sermon, but one redeemed by the humour of its genial preacher. On the previous day there had been the wedding of a bride in her eighties and a groom in his nineties and fortuitously the Old Testament reading on this, the following Sunday, just happened to be the account of ancient Abraham and Sarah being promised an unlikely child by God. The preacher waxed witty in comparing and contrasting the two marriages.

The heavenly tinkle of sanctuary bells

The next service we attended was in St George's, Burnie, on the north coast of Tasmania. We were staying for a couple of nights with an agnostic friend and his Christian wife. He and I had become friends through Scottish Country dancing in the third of my Australian parishes. After graceful strathspeying and frenzied reeling we enjoyed amicable, arguments about religion and politics over tea and cake. I officiated at his wedding.

It was school geography lessons in Rhodesia that convinced me that Tasmania is heaven on earth and so, when the time came to leave St Helena, I wrote to the island's bishop offering myself as the best answer to any parish's problems. His reply was non committal and because mail to and from St Helena was dependent upon the less than regular arrivals or non arrivals of ships, it seemed futile to argue my case. Instead I ended up in the mad diocese of Ballarat, with a flamboyant bishop willing to take a punt on any priest prepared to fill a church with incense and drown his inadequacies and sorrows in whisky.

Homiletic logorrhea

The present bishop of Tasmania is far from being one of that sort. He's a "Sydney Anglican", a form of our denomination noted for being extremely low church, proudly Calvinistic, uncompromisingly anti-gay and against the ordination of women. The Rector of St George's Burnie was one such and so it was interesting to be able to sample that sort of churchmanship for the first time. It was a Communion service with nogs of bread not wafers but real wine delivered though in individual, disposable, plastic shot glasses.

The Rector looked uncomfortable in a too short cassock, voluminous surplice and a preaching scarf instead of a stole. Oddly there was no reading from the Gospels, instead a far from edifying passage from the Book of Revelation, obviously the Anglican lectionary is not used there. His 27 minute long sermon was based on the Old Testament's bloody account of the capture of the Ark and the violent deaths of Samuel and his two sons Hophni and Phineheas. Its content was fine, but the preacher suffered from the all too common priestly malady *homiletic logorrhea,* saying more than you have to say. Two punchy paragraphs would have said all that needed and more effectively.

The rest of our churchgoing was in Hobart, services wreathed in holy smoke, lightened by a multiplicity of candles, brightened by the tinkle of sanctuary bells and graced by short homilies not long sermons. Alleluia.

(543) “This and That” - 7 April 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but from Tasmania

The Gordon River Dam

Lent is teetotal time. For many years I have abstained from alcohol for the full 53 days and nights, with no let up on festive sundays. For 14.52% of the year I become a wowser.

It has nothing to do with health, mortification, or disdain for a bad habit. On the contrary, the purpose is to enhance the enjoyment of a good habit by denying myself its gifts and blessings for a while, in order to sharpen my gratitude to the Almighty for them. It does though make problematical visiting and staying with convivial South African and Australian family members and friends, not seen for years.

Martin Luther, wine, women and song

In my youth we were fortunate enough to have a piano in our home, a mother who could play it and around which we sometimes held family singsongs. Most of the songs came from the fine *Scottish Students Song Book,* one of our favourites being, *Wein Weib, Gesang* (Wine, Women and Song). Its rousing tune is by Carl Friedrich Zelter (1759-1832), a bricklayer and musical autodidact who turned himself into a composer, conductor and teacher proficient enough to number among his pupils Felix Mendelssohn. The words of the first verse and chorus go:

Oh! Wine it glads the heart of man:
Therefore God gave us wine!
Ho, lads! Fill high the flowing can:
Let mirth and youth combine!
Men light of heart perform life’s part:
Then up and drink! Sing while you drink,
What Martin Luther saith, what Martin Luther saith:
Who loves not women, wine and song
He bides a fool his whole life long
And fools we are not, no, no, no!
Nay fools we are not, no!

It is a song with a tune and sentiments that the households of my relatives and friends would approve, whereas the company of even temporary wowsers they would find hard to bear.

So I faced a moral dilemma before flying off to stay with the first of them, the wittiest and most seasoned of all the topers, Bob Bedingham in Cape Town. The answer to my moral quandary, I decided, was to imbibe this Lent, but only beer. My capacity for quaffing, as opposed to sipping, is limited and frequent trips for bladder relief are salutarily sobering too. So his whisky bottles remained unviolated, but conversation over Castle lager sizzled. Indeed he told me one of the most subtle and witty jokes I’ve heard for years, but sadly not one that lends itself to writing down.

Hungry hippopotamuses

In 1956, as an eleven-year-old boy, I moved with my family to live on a mission station in the bush of Southern Rhodesia. It was then a part of the short-lived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland

(1953-1963), an experiment in cooperation and partnership with many noble and positive aims, but also serious flaws. They were optimistic times though and in the year that we moved, the building of Kariba Dam commenced, 420 feet high and 1,899 feet across. The lake behind it, when filled to capacity was and remains the largest man-made reservoir, by volume, in the world. While it was under construction our family of five embarked on a camping holiday that took us to the dam site. We camped above its Zambezi river-diverting coffer dams and on arrival my mother, concerned about the heat, gave us each a salt tablet to swallow on an empty stomach, doubling us over with a mercifully temporary stomach cramp. It was the first stop on an epic camping trip that took us over the Zambezi into Northern Rhodesia, where we camped alongside the Kafue River. There, during the night and to our horror, hippos snorted and snuffled in the grass and rushes alongside our tent. We re-crossed the Zambezi at the Victoria Falls, visited the Wankie game reserve and made our way home via Bulawayo and Salisbury, arriving with a mere half crown left in my father's mission priest's meagrely salaried pocket.

The damming of the Gordon River

I was reminded of that holiday by a trip we made last week to Lake Pedder and the Gordon River Dam in the south west of Tasmania. Like Kariba the Gordon River Dam has a double curvature wall, sometimes called a dome wall, for being curved vertically as well as horizontally. The purpose is to direct the mighty force of the dammed water's weight sideways and downwards into the surrounding mother rock, enabling the dam wall itself to be thinner and therefore cheaper to build.

The Gordon dam is awe inspiring, sited in a spectacularly narrow gorge and inviting visitors to descend 196 steps to stroll the wall's crest to the other side. It is 450 feet high and 650 feet across and its waters feed the largest power station in Tasmania, built 600 feet underground with a generating power of 432 megawatts. The water for the turbines is supplied through a vertical shaft from the lake and after performing its simple turbine turning function is returned into the river downstream through a tunnel.

The birth of the Greens

Earlier this holiday we viewed with similar awe several of the mighty Snowy River Scheme's eight hydro power stations which, in total, have a generating capacity of 4,100 megawatts and so make the Gordon's output seem relatively minor. However, commissioned and built so many decades later, the Gordon dam and two minor and ancillary dams that drowned the natural small lake Pedder turning it into a major one, caused a great stir, much opposition and gave birth to the first ever Green Party. Its proposed second phase, the damming of the Franklin River, was so widely opposed it was never built.

The road west

A second moral dilemma

Hydro electricity provides the most efficient, powerful and effective clean energy available to humankind and so provides the Green movement with a moral dilemma. What is more important, pristine and untouched wallaby, wombat and echidna haunted mountain valleys, or clean energy in abundance and lakes upon which to sail, fish and sport?

They should turn to me for advice, because this Lent I faced a not dissimilar moral dilemma to do with liquid and found an easy and most satisfying answer.

(542) “This and That” - 31 March 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but from Tasmania

Stanley harbour

In Hobart for three weeks we’ve taken a household of six (two parents and four daughters) up to a household of eight.

At every meal we demolish enough good tucker to sustain Diana and me for five or six days back home in Wells. Supermarket trolleys groan with the weight of day to day provender. School lunch boxes demand feats of imaginative creativity and improvisation as well as innumerable sidelines of healthy tidbits. In the schooldays of my own children it was a lot simpler. Lunch boxes contained little except peanut butter, vegemite or egg sandwiches and I still find it funny to recall being informed by my irascible sons that whenever anyone broke wind silently on a school bus, the first person to sniff the evidence would cry out “Pooh, who’s opened their lunch box?”

Busy blue tits

I too have four children and so I view with empathetic awe and admiration my daughter’s and husband’s energy, resilience and creativity in coping with their four girls and the varied activities to which they need ferrying around the city. I also look back in wonder and with wry nostalgia at how my wife Margaret and I coped with our four lively youngsters way back then. As it was with the pair of blue tits feeding their young outside our kitchen window at Boldre, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth for every minute of long summer days, so it is for my daughter and husband and so it was for us, the busiest time of our married lives. It is good and salutary to be back in the thick of hectic family life.

I have been reading with pleasure a belated Christmas present from my daughter: *The Dictionary People* by Sarah Ogilvie. It is an enthralling read and a pleasurable trip back into the Britain of Queen Victoria’s reign. We live in a carping, finger-pointing, virtue-signalling self righteous era that focusses upon and deplores the sins of our forebears while ignoring entirely their so many admirable virtues and achievements.

Victorian crowd sourcing

The book is about the many and varied people who played a part in producing the monumental marvel that is the Oxford English Dictionary. There were so many of them that the author calls it *“the first great crowd sourcing experiment of the Victorian age”*. Thousands of folk, from here there and everywhere, sourced words and sent them to the Dictionary’s editors on “slips” containing not only each word, but also its context in a quotation. *“What do three murderers, Karl Marx's daughter and a vegetarian vicar have in common? They all helped create the Oxford English Dictionary”*.

For the few months between leaving school and going to university I worked at the SPCK bookshop in what is now Harare. It enabled me to purchase the large, two volume Shorter Oxford Dictionary at a 25% discount, a wonderful addition to anyone’s library. The full dictionary, completed in 1928, comprised twenty large volumes.

A fine Victorian

Sir James Murray, born in 1837, was the chief editor and guiding light of the Oxford English Dictionary from 1879 until his death in 1915. He left school at 14 because his parents were too poor to afford to pay his fees and yet he became one of the most erudite men in Britain. Widowed early, he and his second wife Ada had a family of eleven children and when he took on the editorship of the Dictionary his family were roped in to help, their house became a workplace, their family a workforce. Though a workaholic and something of a martinet, Murray was very much a family man with a keen sense of humour and full of fun. He deeply loved his children and they him, he liked to play games with them and to tease them with practical jokes, though home life was strict. Murray rose at five and was

at work before dawn. *"Home life"* writes Ogilvie, *"ran on bells: a wake-up bell at 7.30 a.m., followed by a prayer bell at 8 a.m., followed by breakfast. .....Each Sunday the family walked into town for the morning service at the Congregationalist Church on George Street (*Oxford*). Murray, upright and spry, marched in front with the children following. Locals referred to them as 'The Dic and the little Dics'...."* When the information slips started to pour in from around the world and Murray was overwhelmed by the sheer volume, he called on each and every member of the family *"to help put them in alphabetical and chronological order. Harold, Ethelbert, Wilfrid, Oswyn, Hilda, Ethelwyn, Aelfric, Elsie, Rosfrith, Jowett, and Gwyneth. They were paid between one penny and sixpence an hour depending on the child's age."* He even took dictionary work with him to the hospital when Ada his wife was giving birth to their last child.

Was it worth it?

I warm to the man, in part because I too was something of a workaholic when my children were young, and rose at 5.00am or even earlier in order to get things done. My children too were intimately involved in my parish work life as servers, choristers, youth group members and daily morning prayer sayers with their mother. Like Murray I too sometimes wonder if I deprived my wife and children in being so much a workaholic and so involved in the petty politics of an unpleasantly febrile diocese. Not long before his death, Murray looked back on his career and wrote to his son,

> *'The greatest sacrifice the Dictionary entailed upon me, by far, was the sacrifice of the constant companionship of my own children; and I doubt it was worth the sacrifice. I have tried, as a husband and father, to do what should have been the work of a celibate and ascetic, a Dunstan or a Cuthbert: no wonder it has been a struggle. But has it been worth it?'*

The dictionary certainly was worth it and Murray would have been proud of all his children for none of them failed to make. I too am proud of mine. Our offspring triumph as much in spite of us as because of us.

Spelling the word 'fish'

Sarah Ogilvie has an interesting aside on the subject of spelling: *"Linguists today joke that the word fish could be spelled 'ghoti' (using the 'gh' spelling for /f/ in rough, the 'o' spelling for /i/ in women, and the 'ti' spelling for the /sh/ sound in the middle of nation).*"

The necessary narrative

Tasmania: Stanley

I have just returned from the Maundy Thursday ceremonies at All Saints Church in Hobart. It is my favourite service of the year because the liturgy seems to touch the Faith's very essence and make more sweet sense of it all than on any other liturgical occasion. It was the whole glorious tutti frutti too, with clouds of incenses, the right tune to the hymn *Now My Tongue the Mystery Telling* (Grafton), a lovely *Altar of Repose* and a small choir singing a fifteenth or sixteenth century setting to the Eucharist. I and one granddaughter had a foot washed, though sadly not kissed, as was always the case in my own parishes.

How glad, glad, glad I am to have still close to my heart the ancient, wondrous and utterly necessary narrative framework provided in the Gospels upon which to base and build the lovely aspirational virtues that underpin western civilization as it used to be and is no more: generosity, prudence, sacrifice, forgiveness, valour, justice, fortitude, hope and love.

(541) “This and That” - 24 March 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but from Tasmania

Geelong - the ferry to Tasmania

Melbourne is a city of over five million people, a tad less than Sydney, though by some city boundary definitions it’s a tad more not less. Its population is nine times that of all of Tasmania where we now contentedly reside with my daughter and family. In Strine Melbourne is pronounced Mel-buhn or even Mel-bin, whereas the market town of the same name in Derbyshire, in pukkah, is pronounced Mel-borne,

Pints of schooners

The first time I flew into Melbourne was in late 1985 on my way to take up a position in the Diocese of Ballarat. With me was a heavily pregnant wife, two young boys and a little girl. We were met at the airport by the Bishop of Ballarat’s chaplain and driven to the town of Ararat where, for a mere three months, I was an assistant priest and more importantly our fourth and final child was born. Last week I arrived in Melbourne again, with Diana by train from Albury and far, far less stressed.

Melbourne is a city I like, perhaps because to an Englishman in exile it seems more European than any other Australian city. When my son was at Melbourne University I liked to meet him in a downtown English Pub called *The Charles Dickens* to drink real beer by the pint rather than lager by the more measly Australian ‘schooner’. What is more, the name Melbourne brings Derbyshire to mind, the county from which all Neaums spring and in the south of which, just a couple of miles from the river Trent, is a pleasing market town called Melbourne. At one time it was the home of William Lamb who became the 2nd Viscount Melbourne and twice Prime Minister of England, after whom the Australian city is named. Before inheriting his title he fell in love with and married the intriguing Lady Caroline Lamb (1785-1828) who went on to embarrass him by conducting a notorious affair with Lord Byron, whom she famously described as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know” and whose infatuation for her died before hers for him. After an unsuccessful attempt to meet up with the poet face to face at his house, she wrote on the fly leaf of one of his books “Remember me!”. He responded with this hate poem:

Remember Me

Remember thee! remember thee!
Till Lethe quench life's burning stream
Remorse and Shame shall cling to thee,
And haunt thee like a feverish dream!

Remember thee! Aye, doubt it not.
Thy husband too shall think of thee:
By neither shalt thou be forgot,
Thou false to him, thou fiend to me!

Dubious reassurance to the elderly

Our stay in Melbourne last week was with the one time Dean of Wangaratta and his wife, Ray and Glenys McInnes. I had half hoped to be able to persuade him to take on the parish of Boldre on my

retirement, for he's seven or eight years younger than I am and of similar churchmanship, outlook and humour, as well as an accomplished artist. Moreover he and Glenys had visited us at Boldre vicarage and so are no strangers to the attractions of the parish. However, more of the same is rarely a good idea. They are well settled Melburnians these days, delighting in grandparental duties, golf and art and Ray is much in demand for locum work and assists at Melbourne's vibrant Cathedral. We were the first visitors to their fine new home in Glen Iris and enjoyed a riotous, gossipy, reminiscence and recollection romp, gleefully picking over the characters, fortunes and misfortunes of our priestly, decanal, and episcopal colleagues from days long past.

The essayist and wit, Logan Pearsall Smith (1865-1946), is most remembered these days for his aphorisms and epigrams and there is one on the subject of good company that particularly pleases me: *Hearts that are delicate and kind and tongues that are neither....make the finest company in the world.* I like to think that the hearts of the McInnes and Neaums are delicate and kind, but I know for sure that their tongues for our two days in Melbourne were neither, and what fun it was. Another of Pearsall Smith's witticisms offers a little dubious reassurance to those of us growing old: *The denunciation of the young is a necessary part of the hygiene of older people, and greatly assists in the circulation of their blood.*

Between the Heads and through the Rip

Our friendship with the McInnes' showed its true mettle when Ray readily agreed to rise at 4.15am and take us to Melbourne's Southern Cross Station to catch the train to Geelong. Most inconveniently the ferry to Tasmania, which used to leave from Melbourne, now leaves from that second largest of Victorian cities and gateway to the State's western regions. We arrived at the station in good time, as did the train at Geelong where a small bus delivered us to the quayside with half an hour to spare. In a cool breeze we were able to watch the sun rise from the ferry's upper deck.

It took two and a half hours for the vessel to push cautiously across Port Phillip Bay and then through the notoriously troubled waters of the Rip. The last time we did this was in 2013, though from Melbourne not Geelong, on the container ship Bahia at the beginning of a month long journey across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans to Boldre. Port Phillip is a 750 square mile enclosed bay that protects the ports of Victoria's two largest cities and provides recreational and safe seaside pleasures of all sorts to millions of city residents and holiday makers. Most of the bay is navigable but shallow, its average depth a mere 26 feet and with Melbourne as Australia's busiest port, channels have had to be deepened to accommodate the larger vessels of today.

In 'The Rip' between the 'Heads'

Linking Boldre to the Bay

There is a link between Boldre and the Bay. It is named after Arthur Phillip, the Commander of the First Fleet and first Governor of New South Wales. Richard Johnson, once a curate at Boldre was Chaplain to the First Fleet and the new penal colony's first priest who built the very first church in Australia. The two men were well acquainted, of course and Arthur Phillip even advised Johnson as how best to begin his sermons, always a dangerous thing to do, though their relationship appears to have been cordial.

(540) “This and That” - 17 March 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but in Albury, Australia

Albury - Corellas street feeding

As I write, in Albury in New South Wales, 37°C is forecast for the day, as it was for yesterday and the day before. It is not as bad as it sounds because it is a dry heat and so is only hard to bear approaching and around noon. Our early morning pre-breakfast walks are balmily perfect and it is much the same in the evening. As dusk descended last night, we sat on the veranda of a local pub and it was warmly wondrous as galahs, corellas and cockatoos flew past with contented squawks to roost in Murray river Red Gums and the silent silhouettes of flying foxes headed off to plunder distant gardens and orchards for fruit and nectar against a darkening sky. To be out in the intense heat and bright sunshine of midday, however, is barmy not balmy.

Dazzling the debutantes

We escaped Albury for a couple of days last week by travelling up the Murray river valley to Coryong and then on to Thredbo in the high country. In Coryong, many years ago, I received the debutantes at an anachronistic “Deb Ball”, not uncommon fundraising events in rural church parishes in those days. My little speech for the occasion seemed well received, but in no way did it match one of a few years earlier.

It was delivered by the priest I succeeded in my first Australian parish, an uncompromising and extreme Anglo Catholic of imperious manner and generous proportions, “fat and well liking” as the psalmist puts it. He imbibed too much red wine before he performed the honours at the Deb Ball and so provided an unscripted and unforgettable denouement to his peroration. Strutting around in full voice he fell off the stage with an almighty crash. As William Topaz Mcgonegal, “the worst poet in the English language”, wrote of the Tay Bridge disaster: “it will be remembered for a very long time.” Years later I married several brides who had been debutantes at that Coryong ball who recalled the occasion with delight and amusement.

The priest who fell from the stage was an interesting fellow. In the porch of the church I inherited from him there was a portrait of the Pope and inside a shrine to our Lady of Walsingham where we celebrated a daily Mass to which, on most days, came a single communicant, a delightful woman called Betty Costiff, of whom I became very fond. Her husband, a bit dilly, though in a not entirely unattractive way, attempted to teach me to use a data base on my very first computer, with little success. We had incense at every Sunday morning service and again glorious clouds of it at Benediction every Sunday night. He was a hard working priest who battered protesting Protestants into submissive Anglo Catholicism, or drove them off. Their only Protestant alternative was a rather lovely Presbyterian church on the other side of the the village’s platypus-bearing Emu Creek, but it was burdened with a minister so boring that when he came to visit me I had to leave the room every twenty minutes to stand on my head for thirty seconds in the passage, to bring myself back to full wakefulness.

Mount Kosciuszko

Beyond Corryong we proceeded through hilly, sun burnished countryside to the small town of Khancoban, established after the second world war to accommodate a proportion of the 100,000 people

The High Country

employed in the construction of the Snowy River Scheme, 60,000 of them came from over 30 countries. There we purchased a pass granting us permission to spend two days in Kosciuszko National Park and we pressed on and up, along roads that became more tortuous through country thickly and spectacularly forested and with occasional glorious views.

Thredbo is a ski resort that has had the good sense to transform itself into a mecca for mountain bike devotees once the snow disappears. Winter ski runs have been turned into cunningly devised bike tracks of varying degrees of difficulty.With brackets fitted for bikes they operate throughout summer to take mountain bikers of all ages, some of them tiny, up the mountain to descend at speed down zig zag courses with jumps and runs and turns to the bottom. They are then chair lifted back to the top again and again and again.

We ascended the chair lift ourselves to set us on the way to the summit of Mount Kosciuszko which, at 7,310 feet above sea level, is the highest point in Australia. We were deposited at Eagles Nest which left us an easy walk of four miles and a gentle climb of a thousand feet to the summit and then back. On our return we so enjoyed the peacefulness of chairlift travel we went up and down, up and down, up and down.

Cathedrals and Dams

Like the the three Wise Men (fashionably diversified into one wise woman and two wise men) we returned home from Thredbo by a different route, alongside another arm of the Hume Dam, stopping to goggle at those parts of the Snowy River Scheme that are visible from the road.

Hydro Electricity is a triumph of human ingenuity and achievement and the refusal of eco freaks to countenance the building of new dams is deplorable. The best of them are as beautiful as cathedrals and (materially speaking) a thousand times more useful. Because man does not live on bread alone though, aesthetically and spiritually speaking they are only on a par with cathedrals, both being glorious triumphs of human creativity. Wells Cathedral gloriously enhances the beauty of the Mendip foothills, as does Kariba Dam the Zambezi valley and lake Eucumbene Australia's high country.

Lovely Albury

There is a primitive, two vehicle at a time ferry or punt across the arm of the Hume Dam lake along which we travelled home. As with the chair lift, so with the ferry, we crossed one way, turned round and crossed it back again. The genial ferryman applauded this childishness.

Our amiable, cautious and expert driver and companion on the trip was my son Peter, our Albury host. He is a keen explorer and camper with a four wheel drive Mitsubishi Delica van that has a six cylinder engine and a powerful growl. There were few campsites that we passed at which he hadn't pitched his tent in years gone by and we popped in to several that he deemed worth a look at. He is the only one of our family who has stayed close to where we once lived in Wodonga, though over the river in its more illustrious twin city Albury. A sensible decision, because of all the inland Australian cities known to me, Albury is by far the finest, with a beautifully maintained river frontage and on the edge of some of Australia's finest mountain scenery.

(539) “This and That” - 10 March 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but in Albury, Australia

On the Brisbane River

Rhodesians and Zimbabweans turn up anywhere and everywhere, refugees from the loveliest of countries, but one sadly beggared by greed, graft and brutality.

A friendly tatooed hunk

It was my brother Peter who first flew to Australia, in the early 1980s, to explore the possibilities of settling there as part of the Rhodesian diaspora. He returned positive, with a job lined up and surprised at the remarkable friendliness of ordinary Australians, even on the most casual acquaintance. A bank teller was so over-whelmingly considerate to and familiar with him, he assumed that they must have been at school together, though of course they hadn’t. Diana and I found much the same on our present visit. We took a train trip into Brisbane and at the small suburban railway station we left from, a much tatooed hunk of a stationmaster welcomed us with a warmth that rivalled the sun’s. He rushed out to shake our hands on the platform and to show us how to obtain the cheapest of all fares on the complicated platform ticket dispenser. When at last the train arrived he came out to wave us goodbye.

Under a ceiling fan

It was to Brisbane and my brother’s house that we first made our way, on leaving St Helena in 1985, before travelling south to Victoria to take up a priestly appointment. After the tranquillity of island life Brisbane seemed almost frighteningly brash, fast and slick. We enjoyed it nonetheless, delighted by the strangeness of everything.

On our present visit, nearly forty years later, from a grey, rain-sodden, late winter’s England, it has been warmth and sunshine that have most enraptured us. As in 1985 we were picked up at the airport by Pete and Sue, but accompanied this time by their much loved and remarkable, handsome and emotionally focussed pooch, Benjie. Their home is spacious, beautifully visitor friendly and set in a wondrous and lovingly tended garden which at the back opens invitingly on to green and leafy woodland. We settled down to talk, reminisce and laugh under a lazily rotating ceiling fan, idly wondering whether such devices are designed to turn clockwise in the northern hemisphere and anticlockwise in the southern. It was hot, but rarely sufficient to merit turning on the air conditioner.

Tip turkeys

Our first walk, through lushly gardened suburbs and summer-rainfall green parkland and woods, reintroduced us to wallabies, sulphur crested cockatoos, eastern rosellas and “tip turkeys”, the garbage foraging Australian version of sacred ibises. Australia’s cities and suburbs, unlike Britain’s, have wide streets and verges and are well managed and crisply clean. Irregularities and raised paving stones on paths and pavements are shaved smooth by grinders and shaded seats and play areas provide rest and recreation. It was good to be back. We left lush Queensland, after five restorative days, for the aridity of the winter-rainfall southeast with regret as well as anticipation.

Albury Wodonga

To parish priests bishops are necessities to be tolerated, occasionally admired and very, very rarely revered. One of the barely tolerable ones is the reason why I now lie on a bed typng these inconsequential

notes in the Australian town of Albury, on the north bank of Australia's greatest river, the Murray. As I do so I listen delightedly to the "Woof Woof" calls of a barking owl in my son's back garden. Ten miles upstream is the Hume Dam, a mighty edifice of concrete and earth-embankments that holds back a vast lake. It was built after World War 1, just as the wondrous Snowy Mountains system of 16 major dams, 50 miles of aqueducts, 90 miles of interconnected tunnels and 8 power stations was begun after World War II. Creative and redemptive achievements after destructive mayhem.

When finished in 1936, the Hume Dam was the largest in the southern hemisphere. It captures winter and spring rainfall from the Australian Alps and judiciously releases it to generate hydro-electricity and regulate the Murray's downstream flow for irrigation, flood mitigation and to supply the needs of towns and farms for hundreds of miles across 3 states.

In years gone by, on hot summer days, Diana, myself and my son Peter, have drifted languorously the ten mile stretch from the dam wall to Albury on inner tubes. We have also canoed the same route, meeting platypuses and a wide variety of waterfowl along the way. The canoe trip granted me a theologically unnecessary, but wholly overwhelming total-immersion baptism when I capsized my canoe as we approached Albury.

Throwing dead cats over the wall

On the south bank of the Murray, in the State of Victoria, is the town of Wodonga where I was Rector from 1996 to 2003. My move there was a change of diocese as well as of parish. The Bisbop of Ballarat who in 1985 offered me a parish in Australia, after my sojourn on the island of St Helena, was John Hazlewood, a severely flawed but hugely talented and charismatic prelate. His successor was a grim import from England, with whom I very soon fell out. He once told me that a bishop's best recourse when a parish priest proves difficult, rebellious or a dud is "to throw a dead cat over the wall". Not long afterwards, when I had become a thorn in his flesh, I just happened to be offered, from over the diocesan wall, by his mate the bishop of Wangaratta, the parish of Wodonga. I accepted it with relief.

The twin cities of Albury and Wodonga, geographically divided by the river Murray and politically by the border between Victoria and New South Wales have a combined population these days of about 100,000. In the early nineteen seventies, when the reformist and socially progressive prime minister of Australia was Gough Whitlam, Albury-Wodonga was selected as the pilot project in a scheme to arrest the uncontrolled growth of Australia's large metropolitan areas by directing development to rural centres. It was an innovative, and ambitious scheme that involved the Federal, New South Wales and Victorian governments as well as a generous budget allocation.

Kiboshed

However, a constitutional crisis boiled over in 1975 and Gough Whitlam was deposed as Prime Minister by Sir John Kerr, the Governor General and Queen's representative (dubbed by Whitlam "The Queen's Cur"). It kiboshed permanently the decentralising plan for Albury-Wodonga and so the current twin city population, all these years later, is but a third of the 300,000 projected by Gough Whitlam in the early 1970s.

A few days ago, on the causeway between the two cities, Diana and I were treated to a sumptious restaurant meal by some of my Wodonga parishioners of old. What joyous fun it was. Anglican parishioners are a diocese's raison d'etre, the very salt of the earth, to whom bishops should genuflect and defer, rather than merely milk for cash.

In a Queensland Rain Forest

(538) “This and That” - 3 March 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Not behind the Balustrade in Wells but in Brisbane

Muizenberg Beach - Cape Town

Cape Town is my favourite city. Over and over again, for over seventy years, it has been the gateway to paradise, a stopover station on the way to wondrous destinations.

Again and again

In 1952 it was to Tristan da Cunha, by courtesy of the Arundel Castle and H.M.S. Actaeon, a Royal Navy frigate; three and a half hears later, it was on the way back home to England, by courtesy of a British Petroleum tanker and the Stirling Castle; nine months later it was on the way to Rhodesia, by courtesy of the Edinburgh Castle and a three day steam train chuff chuff to Marandellas; in the early nineteen sixties it was to Beira in Mocambique all the way from Trieste, by courtesy of a Lloyd Triestino liner that called into Cape Town on the way; in 1982 it was on the way to St Helena, by courtesy of South African Railways and the Aragonite, a 12 crew 12 passenger freighter; in 2010 it was on a return visit to Zimbabwe, by courtesy of Lufthanza, South African Railways and a Johannesburg coach; in 2012 it was to return to Tristan da Cunha, by courtesy of the Aghulhas, a polar research vessel and then three weeks later back again. Other visits, among many, have included driving my future bride, after her graduation in Grahamstown, to begin a further year’s study at an Afrikaans speaking needlework college in Paarl and then on to Cape Town. Years before that and after a Cape Town holiday, our hired caravan was turned over by a blast of wind outside Somerset West that took the car over too.

For the past forty or more years my sister Sue and husband Bob have provided the most hospitable of bases in the Cape Peninsula’s Muizenberg, a mere five hundred easy yards away from mile upon mile of incomparable, dazzling False Bay beach.

Baboon haunted peaks

The beauty of Cape Town is not limited to a single city, it encompasses the whole of the fascinating, crooked, Cape peninsula. Table Mountain doesn’t stand alone, there are miles of mighty mountain peaks and valleys that rise, fall and divide the wild Atlantic ocean from glittering False Bay. These mountains are the very first that a six year old Staffordshire-born boy ever encountered and are the yardstick against which all other mountains encountered thereafter have been measured and found wanting. The grey, granite, baboon-haunted peaks and krantzes, etched sharply against the bluest of blue skies and falling down to beaches, cliffs and the sea are incomparable.

Cape Town and its peninsula, while wonderfully African are far more than that. The Cape Peninsula is Africa spiced up and enhanced. Not only by Europe, but also by the Far East, by the descendants of Dutch East India Company slaves, labourers and servants from Indonesia, Madagascar, India and more, as well as by Dutch, English and Hugenot settlers. All have contributed to a cosmopolitan culture with a distinctive architecture, cuisine and intriguing ambience. It is Africa with an exhilarating difference.

Living with risk

Over breakfast with some of my brother in law Bob Bedingham's friends, in a Fish Hoek restaurant overlooking a calmly glittering False Bay, I discussed my enthusiasm for Cape Town and the Cape with a lifetime's resident. He told me of a recent visit to New Zealand which he had found very beautiful, but too cosy, too safe, too complacent. We went on to speculate as to whether or not a part of the Cape's attraction lies in its edginess, in the dangers and opportunities that arise inevitably out of extremes of wealth and poverty and from the legacy of apartheid. The impressive ingenuity, cheerfulness and resourcefulness of the poor, in keeping body and soul together, gladden the heart. In our risk-averse Western culture there is a frisson to living cheek by jowl with risk in a part of the world where there are no go areas and where a degree of caution is called for when out and about.

A force for good

I reflect on the joys of our five days in Cape Town, while lying on a bed early on a warm morning in Brisbane. Through the open, screened window doves call, a kookaburra maniacally cackles and a beautiful garden settles itself down to gracing a new day. The similarities and differences between Australia and South Africa in late summer are marked and are all welcomed and embraced. The most pleasing pleasures of all though are common to both: the joys to be found in family and friends, in reacquaintance, reminiscence and humour. What fun it all is.

My late sister Sue's very best friend when we were on Tristan da Cunha was Pamela Lavarello, remembered by me as a smiling, freckled, self possessed girl with plaits, a year or two older than me. She grew up to be a significant and talented force for good on the island in many and vaired ways, not least in the life of the church. Throughout their lives my sister Sue and Pam kept in touch and when my sister settled in Cape Town they were able to meet up occasionally, not least when Pam was diagnosed with cancer and stayed with Bob and Sue while in the Cape for treatment.

On the day before we left Cape Town Diana and I were delighted to be invited to the 60th birthday bash of Pam Lavarello's daughter, Lorna, whom I first met in Kettering to discuss a trip to Tristan in 2010. Married to Drew she is now an ordained priest resident in Fish Hoek and chaplain to a prestigious girls school in the Cape. It was the best of happy parties in a lovely home in the hills behind Fish Hoek overlooking False Bay. I was asked to provide a grace:

Grace for Lorna Lavarello's Birthday Bash

We thank you Lord with heart and soul
That Lorna's reached the landmark goal
Of three score years with such panache,
Such zing and zest, such flair and dash.

That she's so eloquent and gracious,
So fun-filled, sparkling and vivacious;
A South Atlantic Island's gift
To all whose faith requires a lift.

For Drew as well, a canny fellow,
Who saw in Lorna Lavarello
Such qualities he knew she'd make
A spouse on whom his life to stake.

For Pamela her best of mothers
A friend (surpassing all the others)
Of Sue, my sister, now deceased
Both she and Pam to heaven released.

For sparkling liquor, lovely food,
For joyful atmosphere and mood,
For humour, wit and jubilation,
Festivity and celebration.

For all these blessings by the score,
Both in the past with more in store,
Unstintingly upon us poured,
We thank you good and gracious Lord. **Amen.**

(537) “This and That” - 18 February 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The walk home down Chamberlain St. after Evensong

Parsley can be eaten and enjoyed even for breakfast. In our small garden there is such a profusion of the crisp and curly headed version of the herb, we eat it with pretty well everything. It is fortunate that Diana isn’t pregnant because, when eaten in abundance by expectant mothers, parsley can have uterotonic effects, it might well induce contractions.

Archipelagos in an ocean of orange juice

Breakfast in our household consists of a bowl of “fruit soup”. The regular and invariable basis of this concoction consists of a banana, a pear, a generous two handfuls of Tesco’s frozen “perfectly imperfect” berries, a rather less than generous, single handful of oats, plus home nurtured kefir and a good dollop of yogurt. All these ingredients are blitzed ruthlessly to smithereens and then poured into a bowl of squeezed orange juice. The orange juice is reluctant to lose its identity by melding into the more viscous “soup” which allows us to be creative in our breakfast enjoyment. Isolated soup islands or archipelagos of islands can be formed in the ocean of orange juice, sometimes so cleverly we can show off our artistic endeavours to each other.

Into the blitz go all sorts of left over bits and pieces as well, be they savoury or sweet, only rarely with dire consequences. At present it is mostly parsley that intriguingly darkens and speckles our breakfast concoction.

I was brought up on parsley sauce, especially with fish, but no longer much enjoy it. To fading taste buds it is too bland. Preferable to either French (curly leafed) or Italian (flat leafed) European parsleys is Chinese parsley (cilantro/coriander). All three belong to the same botanical family, but the European parsleys are mild of flavour, whereas the Chinese is strong, spicy and citrusy. We like to blitz great bunches of it in coconut milk to contribute to the greenest of green Thai curries. Our small, wondrous, versatile and powerful blitzer we picked up at a Boldre fete for next to nothing.

Both Diana and I are old and English enough to remember a life before avocados, capsicums, cilantro and sweet potatoes, all now an indispensable part of our diet. It was the most worldly wise and learned of all my assistant priests who introduced me to Chinese parsley. Finely chopped and glistening with olive oil it was spread thickly on a fillet of salmon and he apologised for it, insisting that it tasted like iron filings. It did, and does, and we love it.

Myrtle and the turtle

A very different kind of parsley enlivened life in my first parish in the diocese of Mashonaland. I encountered it when taking communion to the housebound, one of the most rewarding tasks of old fashioned parish priesting. These days home communions tend to be delegated to lay people so as to leave parsons more time to be strangled, neutralised, depressed and rendered utterly ineffective by diocesan red tape. Among those to whom I took the sacrament regularly in my Mashonaland parish were two elderly ladies, one was a widow, Nita Richter and the other a certain Miss Myra Parsley. What a fine and doughty pair these two old birds were. We had great fun together. My journal entry for 12 January 1979 goes:

> *I am not very effective at the moment. I have been struggling with a magazine article for ages and can get nowhere. This week’s sermon was abandoned.*

I went to take home communions, first to old Mrs C. (a rather dull old thing) and then to Mrs Richter and Miss Parsley which was much more fun. Nita told me a limerick which went something like this.

There once was a lady called Myrtle
Who slept on the beach with a turtle.
Next day at dawn
She gave birth to a prawn
Which proved that Myrtle was fyrtle.

I enjoyed a beer with them.

Eventually and sadly I took Miss Parsley's funeral. My homily for the occasion is number 174 in my catalogue of sermons, but it was well before the days of computers and so existed only as hard copy in a large file, the contents of which I burned before leaving Australia for Boldre. A pity. Penned in the lovely chapel my journal entry for 22 October 1981 goes*:*

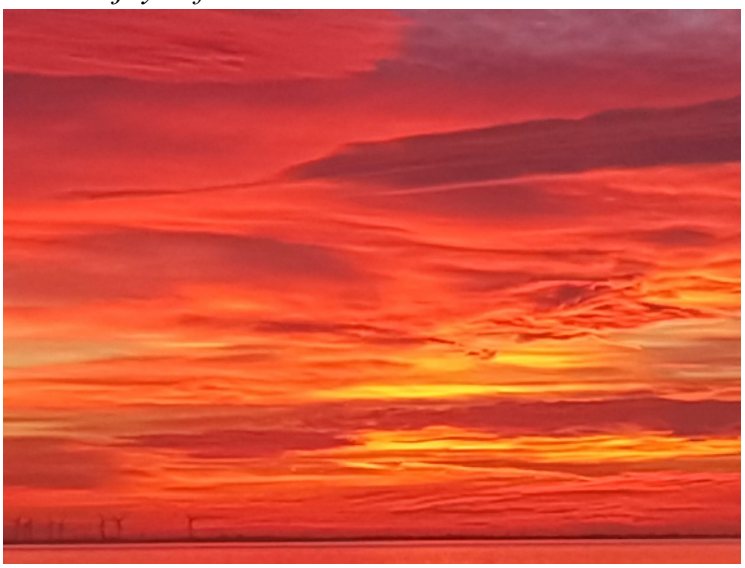
A clear sunny morning, but still a nip in the air. The chapel windows are not open. I should imagine that heat will take over today and that it will begin to get back to more usual October weather..... Yesterday I finished my sermon, there's nothing particularly wonderful or sparkling about it and I then visited Nita Richter with whom I had a good gossip. She told me that Mona Terblanche, on hearing that I was off to St Helena, said: "Oh no! I was hoping he'd be here to bury me and to say a few words." Nita added that she too had hoped for the same.

François de Malherbe

I discovered a different sort of herb from parsley last week. I was searching for the source of one of my favourite epigrams and at last found it. It comes from the pen of a French poet called François de Malherbe (1555—1628), a self styled *excellent arrangeur de syllabes.* He was a stickler for strict form, restraint, and purity of diction and as such was a precursor to French Classicism. His epigram, which I have often quoted without knowing where it came from, has to do with preaching and came to mind last Sunday as I listened to a sermon that dragged on for about twenty minutes. The preacher spoke good sense, but used far too many words in doing so.

He doesn't use a script and as a result, instead of coming to an end with the arresting finality of a crisply closed door, he dithers, lingers and dribbles to a never-ending end. How I long for a bit of zing, and zest, and perzazz. Sermons need attention to style if they are to fire, spark and inspire rather than send us to sleep. François de Malherbe's epigram is altogether apposite:

Improve your style, monsieur! You have disgusted me
with the joys of heaven.



Sunset
Clacton on Sea

(536) "This and That" - 11 February 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

To our delight Diana and I are soon to be afloat once more on a large vessel. It is only for nine hours though, as foot passengers on the large ferry that crosses Bass Strait to Tasmania. In Devonport we will be met by a couple I married about 16 years ago on mainland Australia and will stay with them for a couple of days. They are keen Scottish Country Dancers, the groom was part of a group who danced weekly at St John's Wodonga when I was Rector there from 1996-2003.

Violins and tudelsacks

Their wedding homily was the first in which I managed the bizarre juxtaposition of orangutans, Jack Russells, violins, tudelsacks, Honoré de Balzac and Johann Sebastian Bach. An edited version goes as follows:

"The French novelist Honoré de Balzac said that the majority of husbands, reminded him of an orangutan trying to play the violin. He has a point. Every wife, surely, understands just what he means. Because to the perceptive and romantic women, like violins, are subtle, nuanced, delicate and mysterious creatures of infinite tonal variety, mood and character; sonorous, dark, richly ambivalent and deep at times; silvery pure, airy, light, and graceful at others; humorous, quirky, bouncy and buoyant at yet others. They require the empathy, sensitivity, imagination and dazzling technique of a virtuoso, if they are to sing the melody they have it in them to sing. Yet all they get, too often, is an unmusical, fumbling orangutan.

"To be fair to men it could be said, (though somewhat stereotypically) that the majority of wives are like a Jack Russell puppy attempting to master a set of bagpipes; prodding, yapping, whining and nagging in an attempt to draw a sweet melody from a great, lazy, uncomplicated bag of wind, when all it is capable of is a droning, burping, cacophonous caterwauling.

The Peasant Cantata

"Is it right, though, to suggest that harmonious marriages are as impossible to achieve as harmonious duets on a violin and bagpipes played by an orangutan and a Jacqueline Russell puppy? Of course not. The impossible, like God, is worth reaching for and aspiring to and harmonious marriages abound, as do noble as well as ignoble failures. We can be far too cynical.

"Johann Sebastian Bach, in his sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin works greater miracles on that instrument than any composer on earth. It is inconceivable that such a genius would stoop so low as even to notice, let alone write for bagpipes, but in the final chorus of his charming, burlesque *"Peasant Cantata"* the bagpipes and a violin do converge, after a fashion, though without the help of either orangutans or Jack Russells.

Nothing is impossible

"In the Cantata's final chorus, the violin plays a sprightly melody to the words: "*Wir gehn nun, wo der Tudelsack, der Tudel, Tudel, Tudel, Tudel, Tudel, Tudel sack..... In unsrer Shenke brummt.....*" The word *"Tudelsack"* is German for bagpipes. The impossible has been achieved, albeit in an oblique way. A violin and the bagpipes have come together harmoniously not as two instruments but in a word and an instrument, as a verse with musical accom-paniment. Nothing is impossible. Not even a happy marriage.

"This delightful little musical miracle is pulled off by the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach, but what of the happy marriage miracle? What makes possible such an impossibility?

A humdinger vow

"In church weddings it could well have something to do with the Marriage Service's radical and totally unequivocal vow, which is not a mere quid pro quo contract, but a humdinger of a vow. It's a radical commitment to stick together *for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death....* It is a groom's wedding present to his bride and hers to him. An unequivocal assurance that neither will reject, or turn their back on the other, will never abandon the other. If made, meant and kept from the bottom of the heart, what a punt to take on another human being,

what a risk. Even if sometimes and inevitably it fails, it remains a courageously admirable risk in a pusillanimously risk-averse society such as ours.

"It declares that neither spouse need pretend to be other than who they are, for fear of losing their spouse, or of being abandoned. They grant each other the freedom to play the melody that they have it in them to play. It's a wedding present of wedding presents, more precious than anything money can buy.

"The words of the final chorus of Bach's Peasant Cantata suit the occasion for which it was written, the installation of Carl Heinrich von Dieskau as Lord of the local manor on his 36th birthday:

We're going to the tavern
where the merry bagpipe drones
and shout full of glee
Long live Dieskau and his kin,
May they be granted whatever they desire
and whatever they have set their heart on....."

At the Reception that followed the wedding of the two Scottish dancers, my Grace before the meal was likewise an attempt to suit that occasion. The bride, Rosemary, as well as being a dancer, was also a church chorister:

1. *Thank you Lord for song and dance*
   Both of which can spark romance
   That kindles into wedded bliss
   And on to happy days like this.

2. *With Rosemary espoused as wife*
   Peter's hobby's made his life,
   For love his life has so enhanced
   His every step from now is danced.

3. *While Rosemary as Peter's wife*
   Has had her hobby made her life
   With Peter's love declared life long
   Her every syllable's a song.

4. *Lord, let your music of the spheres*
   Inspire their marriage down the years,
   And every step of their romance
   Adumbrate the cosmic dance.

5. *If you'll excuse my French, "un peu",*
   Grant them a heavenly "pas des deux",
   And may a deep harmonious chord
   Best symbolise their sweet accord,

6. *And now let wit and mirth resound*
   And copious food and drink abound
   Fuelling joy beyond all measure,
   And happiness, delight and pleasure

Albrecht Durer:
Peasant Couple Dancing
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Cloisters, Wells Cathedral

(535) "This and That" - 4 February 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

A year ago our Ford Fiesta rolled down the Boldre Vicarage drive, under the willow tree we'd planted eight years previously, over the little trickle of a bottom-of-the-garden stream, through the laurel-leafy tunnel at the drive's end and out onto Pilley Hill road. It then rolled down to the Lymington river, over Boldre Bridge and westward ever westward to Somerset and Wells. We were at last gone.

A sinful seventy seven year old

At a farewell bash I marked the event with a lengthy piece of self-reflective light verse (or "doggerel" if you're a pretentious prat) which contained the following:

... as he ponders and reflects,
Surveys his faith, his life inspects,
He takes delight that faith and years
Have brought him far more joy than tears.
That God has blessed a hundredfold
This sinful, seventy seven year old
With favours numerous and lavish,
Especially this most pleasing parish.

What better place to age and moulder
Than good St John the Baptist Boldre?
What better, lovely culmination
To a lifelong priest's vocation,
Than such a church in such a place?
Such an awesome, grace-filled space,
Where this priest of long years standing
Has made the very softest landing.....

Assisted by the farewell generosity of the good folk of Boldre we are now, just over a year later, about to depart on an extended holiday. In a couple of weeks time we fly to spend five days in Cape Town with my brother in law, Bob Bedingham, on to Brisbane for a few days with my brother Peter and his wife Sue and then a twenty three hour train trip south to Albury, on the river Murray, to stay with my son Peter. Our time with him is to conclude with a jaunt over the mountains, in his good company and car, to Gippsland and on to Melbourne for a couple of days with friends. After this there is to be a nine hour ferry trip across Bass Strait to Tasmania where

we'll stay a couple of days with friends near Devonport before catching a bus to Hobart for three weeks with my daughter Lil, husband Nathan and their four fine daughters. We arrive home after Easter. Thank you Boldre indeed.

Riotous company from St John's

Every now and then Boldre turns up in Wells. Last Monday, on the anniversary of our arrival, we were joined by four good folk from Lymington to share the peace and beauty of a perfectly sung Choral Evensong in the Cathedral. This was followed by a riotous, laughter filled and jovial evening that shattered the peace of first the *City Arms Pub* and then of *Rugantino's Restaurant*. St John's Boldre folk fizz and effervesce more readily and wholeheartedly, it seems, than those of St Andrew's Cathedral. It was a good night.

Golden Bells and Pomegranates

Last week I was able to view my five year old self from a new angle. I received a 1951 photograph of the infant class at my very first school in the village of Leigh in Staffordshire. Aged five I stand solemnly in the back row, my sister Susan sits pensively in the front row. The photo was sent by the wife of an old playmate from those distant times, David Clarkson. They had been visiting my website to read not my effusions, but those of my father of whom her husband had very happy memories.

For about nine years, in his eighties, my father was my honorary curate in Australia and I asked him to supply the pew-sheet with weekly articles about his long and interesting life. He produced two series, the first he called *Golden Bells and Pomegranates,* about his fifty years as an Anglican priest in England, on the Island of Tristan da Cunha, in Southern Africa and on the Island of St Helena and the second he called *Count Your Blessings,* about his life growing up in Derbyshire before his ordination. All these articles are on my website. The title: *Golden Bells and Pomegranates* comes from the twenty eighth chapter of Exodus verses 33-35 where Aaron's priestly robe is described as follows:

> *On its lower hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all round the lower hem, with bells of gold between them all round — a golden bell and a pomegranate alternating all round the lower hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it when he ministers, and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, so that he may not die.*

A scurvy knave and king

We are unlikely ever to suffer from scurvy in Wells. We have our own vegetable garden at Diana's daughter Martha's place in West Horrington and there is a splendid fruit and vegetable market on Thursdays and Saturdays a few miles out of town. With our sausage and mash a few evenings ago we enjoyed no less than ten vegetables.

Henry VIII was less fortunate. The historian Susan Maclean Kybett suggests that he did not die from syphilis as was once widely believed, but from scurvy. She maintains that this ailment would have affected his personality and could conceivably have influenced his decision to marry six times, have two of his wives beheaded and to initiate the Reformation. In an issue of the monthly 'History Today', Kybett writes that Henry VIII's frequent colds, constipation, bloated body, collapsed nose, bad breath, ulcerated legs and wild mood swings are all symptoms of scurvy. It was a common affliction in Tudor England, fruits and vegetables were not only scarce but shunned by the upper classes as unfit to eat.

A Presbyterian son of the manse and history teacher at the school where I taught English for two years, knowing me to be a chauvinistic Anglican, once sent his Form 4 boys down to me for their English lesson with the following instructions: "Tell Mr Neaum that in history Mr Stewart said that the Anglican Church was spawned in a syphillitic bed of adultery." My scornful refutation of such a claim didn't register much with the boys, but the claim is nonsense. The Anglican church goes all the way back to the first missionary to the British Isles, hundreds and hundreds of years before the reign of the scurvy knave, Henry VIII. He merely purged and cleansed it of a lot of accumulated detritus to pull it a little closer to its true course, albeit from dubious motives.

(534) "This and That" - 28 January 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The Icon of St Andrew, Wells Cathedral

For the first time and at last, I am regularly worshipping in a building dedicated to my personal patron saint. A glittering icon of Saint Andrew gazes down at the grim reality of Sinner Andrew as he sits in peace perfect peace at weekday choral evensongs. I'm at home in Andrew's place.

Notetandohamba

The name Andrew is a good, strong one, derived from the Greek word for *man* and so is taken to mean *manly, brave, strong, courageous.* These attributes come nowhere near to fitting my character, but are worth aspiring to and I am more than glad to identify with the Gospel's Andrew who was only a modestly significant apostle. He is notable for introducing Jesus, with hugely significant consequences, to his more famous and mercurial brother Peter and also to a little lad with a small lunch pack of bread rolls and salted fishes.

In my first form at secondary school there were seven Andrews, but since then a certain Prince, whose hand I once shook on the Island of St Helena, has dragged the name down into disfavour. It will take a generation or two to regain it's lustre, unaided, I suspect, by any close association with me.

In the Africa of my youth, as in the bible, names had a far greater significance than they do in our society today. Some of those names appeared laughable at the dinner tables of we self-satisfied Europeans: "Kingsize", "Bastard", "Coca Cola", "Bloody Fool" and "Two and Sixpence" for example, but names like these were debased, shanty-town names, corruptions of a concept of naming that originally and properly is both biblical and beautiful. Popular and genuine African names in Zimbabwe are: *Chipo* [Gift], *Tendai* [Thankyou], *Tsitsi* [Mercy], *Notetandohamba* [He Talks While He Goes].

So too it is with biblical names: *Jacob* [One Who Takes By The Heel], *Benoni* [Son Of My Sorrow], *Ichabod* [Inglorious], *Esau* [Hairy], *Caleb* [Dog], *Deborah* [Bee], *Jonah* [Dove], *Zibeah* [Gazelle], *Mahershalelhashbaz* [The Spoil Speeds,The Prey Hastens].

Nappy Rash

In our society today it is only in nicknaming that we come anywhere near to being as imaginative. The word 'nickname' is derived from the Middle English *ekename*, derived in turn from the Old English word *eac* meaning "also". So an *ekename* is an "also" name. It was "misdivision" of the syllables in the phrase *an ekename* that led to *a nekename* and on to a *nickname*.

In the middle ages surnames were uncommon and Christian names of limited variety, so nicknames were a useful means of identification. It was much the same on the island of St Helena where many islanders have the same surname. As a consequence nearly everyone on the island is nicknamed, often most imaginatively. A German enthusiast for all things St Helenian has compiled a list of 383 St Helenians, with their nicknames attached. One or two are unrepeatable, but here are a few: *Sidewinder, Brick-dust, Crack-Ass, New Pence, 2654, School Bus, Mouse- Tamer, Polar Bear, Purse Bag, Milk Tin.....* When Diana was teaching in Lesotho the local electrician was nicknamed *Half Past Two.* He was a foundling who had been discovered on a doorstep one afternoon at that time.

My own nickname at school was *Barbarian*, shortened first to *Barb* and then to *Bob*. Years later, as a teacher for two years at Alan Wilson Technical High School, my pupils gave me another one, it is neither flattering nor unflattering but I never divulge it in case I breathe into it a new lease

of life. One of my very young looking teacher colleagues was nicknamed *Nappy-Rash*. It infuriated him, but there was nothing he could do except grow old enough for it to become a backhanded compliment.

The supplanter

To the ancient Hebrews an item's or person's name was inextricably bound up with its very existence. In the book Genesis, the act of Creation is not complete until all creatures have been given a name. In Ecclesiastes we read: *"Whatever has come to be has already been named"*. To be named is to exist. What is more, in the Old Testament your existence after death continues in your name perpetuated by your descendants. This explains the bizarre practice of a man being required to father children by his brother's wife, should that brother prove impotent or die before having fathered children himself. Any child thus conceived would bear the brother's name and so ensure his personal life after death.

In those biblical times, as is so often the case with nicknames, your given name would often attempt to express or foretell your personality. Esau says of his unscrupulous brother: *"Is he not rightly named Jacob (supplanter) for he has supplanted me these two times"*. Abigail excuses her stupid husband by saying: *"As is his name, so he is. Nabal [fool] is his name and folly is with him"*. The changing of "*Jacob*" to "*Israel*" indicates a change in his personality, as too does Jesus' change of "*Simon's*" name to "*Peter*", the Rock.

Jesus was named at his circumcision and the name "Jesus" is the Greek form of a common Jewish name "Joshua", which means "The Lord's Salvation." The original Old Testament Joshua was indeed something of a saviour, for he led the people of Israel safely into Canaan, but to Christians, baptized in the name of Jesus, it is he who is Saviour par excellence. He sums up in his person all the qualities of his name, which bears an aura of its subject and expresses something of his personality, he is God's saviour of us. The name and the reality that it names are so closely bound together that when St. Paul says, "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow", it makes enough sense to persuade many of us to bow our heads. When we hear people use his name as a swear word we cringe, it is like rubbing the very man's face in the dirt.

Baring Gould

I have now reached the age of forgetting people's names. Not of my own children, though I do often call my daughter Ray by her sister's name Lil and vice versa. The Revd. S. Baring Gould was surely helped to write the many hymns he wrote, including O*nward Christian Soldiers,* by paying a curate to perform all his clerical duties. It also gave him ample leisure to sire fifteen children. He was rector of Lew Trenchard, in the wilds of West Devon and on one occasion popped into a village function to give it his paternal blessing. He circulated awhile and while doing so patted a little girl on the head and said kindly: "And whose little girl are you?" She replied: "Yours, daddy," and burst into tears.

On a walk to the morning liturgy

(533) "This and That" - 21 January 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

Much of last week was spent composing a tribute for the funeral of my best and oldest friend in Clacton on Sea.

A proto feminist and poet

Of all the innumerable euphemisms for dying, my favourite is *"to hop (or drop) off the twig*". It suggests a quick, crisp and tidy departure. The first recorded occurrence of the term is in a 1797 novel called *Walsingham; or the Pupil of Nature* by Mary Darby Robinson (1757-1800), a feisty proto-feminist, poet, novelist and celebrity: *".....He kept to his bed three days, and hopped the twig on the fourth,*" she writes in the novel, though in this, its original context, it doesn't mean "to die" it means simply to depart suddenly. My own father, if ever my brother, sister and I became a nuisance, would tell us to "*hop it.*"

Another of my favoured euphemism for dying is "*to join the choir invisible*" because it refers to a fine poem by George Eliot (1819 –1880) which begins:

O may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence....

Bloody but unbowed

The friend to whom I shall be paying tribute I met on our first day at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1965. For three years we were very close, but thereafter, separated usually by thousands of miles, we kept in touch only intermittently. Beginnings often become ends though and so for the past few years, as he became increasingly incapacitated by illness, we have shared enjoyable and almost weekly, hour-long telephone conversations. *"Bloody but unbowed"* he was uncomplaining and so our conversations didn't dwell upon his ailments, but on common enthusiasms: poetry, films, novels and the quality and joy of the recorded choral evensongs he loved so much compared to those I attend daily here in Wells.

The Nave - St Andrew's Wells

This past week has been nostalgia-filled then. I've been reliving my university days with a member of *the choir invisible*, living them once more in a *mind made better by his presence*. Recalling, with intense pleasure, sunny, jacaranda and flamboyant tree blossomed university years of close friendship and of long conversations that sometimes transcended mere wit, banter and persiflage to move on to matters that really do matter: our deepest convictions, hopes and aspirations. May my friend, so quirkily idiosyncratic, intriguing, gifted, funny, God besotted and God bonkers, dilly daft and yet profoundly sound, rest in peace and rise in glory.

South of death's divide

It was early in the year 2009 that my first wife Margaret died, cruelly long before her time. She too faced her ordeal courageously, refusing the chemotherapy that her specialist told her was likely to be of only marginal effect. She died at home, in our Australian vicarage and I have just read through my journal entries from those sad, sad days. They are all but unbearable to recall and yet it has been good to do so, because she too is a member of *the choir invisible* and lives again in a *mind made better by her presence*. May she who took such a risky punt on agreeing to marry

the likes of me and who was so selflessly courageous and such a talented seamstress and mother, rest in peace and rise in glory.

Six months after her death I took a week off for a short, local nostalgia binge as a prelude to a much longer one of six months, planned for the following year. I spent four days back in my first Australian parish, two of them in the small village of Skipton and two in the nearby village of Linton. They would have been miserable had they not been spent with good, ex-parishioner friends to take my mind off an intolerable absence. It was the first holiday on my own for thirty three years and good to be south of Australia's Great Divide again, but sad to be south of death's divide.

Reefs, rocks and ship wrecks

The last three days of the holiday week were spent in lighthouse keeper accom-modation at Cape Otway which, except for Wilson's Promontory, is the southern-most cape of the Australian mainland. It confronts the wild Southern Ocean and the light-house warns of cliffs, reefs and rocks that have wrecked at least eight vessels down through the years. In 1942, the *City of Rayville* hit a German mine off the Cape and foundered. It was the first American ship lost in World War II and in response the Americans built a radar bunker nearby which is now open to the public.

Cape Otway lighthouse

My visit was in July, mid-winter in Australia, and the wind carried flurries of squally rain that made sweet music on the iron roof of my small dwelling, reminding me of my childhood's Tristan da Cunha and sending me duvet-delving in delight. I walked, cooked, ate, read, slept and pondered. On the second day a great storm brewed and I was able to stand thrilled on the lighthouse's top balcony as the wind all but blew me over and icy rain numbed my cheeks.

Cranmerian cadences

I took the 1662 Book of Common Prayer for my daily office recitations which was a good decision because the whole holiday was an exercise in nostalgia. A return to an early and happy parish, to old and much loved friends, to wild weather, heavy seas and rugged beauty, to oneness, singleness, solitariness, to the Cranmerian cadences that first awakened me to the music of language.

The Psalm on the second night was number 139, my favourite. It first cast its spell on me in 1970 as I turned back to full faith in London before offering myself for priesthood: *How dear are thy counsels unto me, O God: O how great is the sum of them! If I tell them they are more in number than the sand: when I wake up I am present with thee.* Those two verses have been set to music most beautifully in an anthem by William Crotch.

How grateful I am that my surname is Neaum and not Crotch.

(532) "This and That" - 14 January 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade in Wells

The Choir - St Andrew's Wells

To be summoned to Sunday church by ten mighty bells juddering the stonework and quivering the roof timbers of a great tower and storming the atmosphere with jubilance and joy, lifts the spirits and springs the step of all true English men and women. It is one of our country's and the Church of England's glories, an irresistible summons not only to me and Diana, but also to that most attractive of Anglicans, John Betjeman.

Rocking the sailing clouds to sleep

His blank-verse autobiographical poem is called *Summoned By Bells* and they peal throughout his verse. One of his poems is called: *On Hearing the Full Peal of Ten Bells from Christ Church, Swindon, Wilts,* an admirable mouthful of a title. It is bettered by another gem of a poem: *Church of England Thoughts Occasioned by Hearing the Bells of Magdalene Tower from the Botanic Gardens, Oxford on St Mary Magdalene's Day.* Here are a few lines.....

....A multiplicity of bells,
A changing cadence, rich and deep
Swung from those pinnacles on high
To fill the trees and flood the sky
And rock the sailing clouds to sleep.

A Church of England sound, it tells
Of "moderate" worship, God and State,
Where matins congregations go
Conservative and good and slow
To elevations of the plate.

And loud through resin-scented chines
And purple rhododendrons roll'd,
I hear the bells for Eucharist
From churches blue with incense mist
Where reredoses twinkle gold....

A justified dereliction of duty

Thirty eight years ago, when I first arrived in Australia, I spent three months as an assistant priest in the parish of Ararat, to acclimatize myself to a crazy diocese, before being appointed to a parish of my own. Four years later I was invited to return to Ararat as its Rector. On my first morning as a lowly assistant priest, I made my way over to church to say mattins and celebrate the Eucharist with my Rector and a local retired priest. Before going into church I automatically went over to the bell gantry and gave the large, single, church bell thirty three good rings.

This was something I had done with such meticulous regularity in my previous parish, on the Island of St Helena, that many islanders claimed to time their rising from bed each morning to the bell's ring. As I did so I liked to imagine that those hard working souls who, as the author of Ecclesiasticus says, *maintain the fabric of the world, and whose prayer is the handiwork of their craft,* were reminded by the bell's daily ring that their parish priest was offering vocal prayer and

the Eucharist on their behalf and for their welfare. Only once did I fail to ring the bell on time. That was on the morning upon which my St Helenian daughter Elizabeth was born. As good an excuse for dereliction of duty as a married priest could ever find.

On my second morning in the Australian parish of Ararat, as on the first, I again gave the bell thirty three good rings. Just as I finished, the door of a nearby house burst open and the raucous, ocker voice of a local Australian Sheila, the female equivalent of *Barry Mackenzie*, ripped the air apart by pouring over my sainted head abuse and calumny for disturbing the peace. My pusillanimous Rector refused to allow me to call the termagant's bluff and so Ararat, sadly, never grew accustomed to being woken by the tolling of a Matin Chime.

D.d.d.d.d.d.d.d.dong

The bell of my theological college chapel in Grahamstown, South Africa, was an awkward brute with a mind of its own. All students were required to take on a weekly stint of chapel-bell ringing, of which the most complicated part was to ring the 'angelus' correctly without any superfluous little dings and dongs. To do this required skill and was a matter of some pride to all the anglo-catholic students. Those of a more protestant persuasion delighted to make a hash of it.

There was one poncy anglo catholic student in particular who developed the art of ringing the angelus on that awkward bell flawlessly. He took sufficient pride in his efforts to invite a fall. One of his fellow students climbed the chapel's roof and tied fishing line to the bell's clapper. The angelus began: *dong, dong, dong....* the first nine rings were meticulously and crisply rung. There followed the customary devotional, reverential, though pride-full silence, and then suddenly a frenzied, *d.d.d.d.d.d.d.d.dong,* on and on and on as the fishing line was pulled and jerked and pulled and jerked. How we, and I hope the angels, laughed.

I once repaired the rope attached to the clapper of the bell on St Helena with the help of a large jubilee clip and some judicious drilling. It was a difficult, neck-craning job of which I boasted to Edwy, a bass in the choir and the ringer of the five minute bell. At Evensong the following Sunday, Edwy rang for only three of the required five minutes. He then appeared with blood trickling from the bridge of his nose and a reproachful look. My proudly boasted jubilee clip had detached itself and conked him one. Perhaps my laughter at the sabotaged pride of an angelus rung many years previously was at last avenged.

African clangers

People were summoned to worship in the African mission station churches of my youth, not by a tolling bell, but by the clang of a piece of railway line dangling from a tree branch, banged with a large bolt. This was not a memorably musical sound, but merely to recall it fills me with nostalgia, not so much for the noise itself as for the vibrant African singing and worship it promised.

If this is so, then perhaps means have not quite become ends. My love of bells is an integral part of and closely linked to my love and worship of the one true and living God, to whom be all honour, praise and glory, Amen.

St John's Chikwaka Church 2010

(531) “This and That” - 7 January 2024

The first family pet I can remember was a large, tortoiseshell tomcat on the island of Tristan da Cunha. A useful family member in a small, wooden bungalow of a vicarage in which we went to sleep to the sound of rats’ feet pattering above us in the ceiling.

Stop it I like it

The second pet to enliven family life was on our mission station in the African bush, a feisty, white Maltese poodle with black eye patches. He was called Diki, which means ‘small’ in the Shona language. His quirks and idiosyncrasies were mostly lovable, but not his reaction too tyre-squashed, sun-baked, still stinking lizards on the roadside, which both attracted and repelled him. He would approach one cautiously, retreat, approach again and then gingerly circle it, sniffing all the while with his lips curled as if he hated himself for being so tantalised by it. In the end attraction overcame disgust and he’d lie down alongside the noisome carcase to wriggle, twist and roll all over it. Repelled but attracted, hating it but loving it, a canine version of “stop it, I like it”.

Visiting a gaol for the first time was not wholly dissimilar. There was an instant flash of fascinated recognition. My Rhodesian, male only boarding school came vividly back to mind with a frisson of both pleasure and horror, a sort of ambivalent nostalgia, a human not a canine version of “stop it, I like it”. Gaols, like boys boarding schools, are male only societies characterised by starkly un-nuanced, uncomplicated, masculine values, longings and failings. Cell walls are plastered with pictures of beautiful women and muscular men, gravity defying bosoms, gleaming pectorals. Dominant inmates swagger around in minuscule shorts to show off beefy calves and monstrous hams. I felt at home. Gaol was boarding school again, horrible, lovely; misery, joy. Ambivalent nostalgia.

What a Vicar

For a variety of reasons church congregations are composed more of women than men. Perhaps because for most males, God to be God, needs muscle. The cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism and now women priests and women ministers elsewhere, might well address the need for the feminine, but where in mother Church does a red-blooded male look for muscle? Perhaps only in the past.

There is an old edition of “Who's Who” that introduces us to the Reverend Sidney Swan, MA. He was born in 1862, rowed in the Oxford and Cambridge boat race in 1883, 1884 and 1885, won the Cambridge sculls and pairs and the Grand Challenge in 1886 and 1887 and also, in record time, the Steward's in 1885 and 1887. We are informed that in Japan he won “...most things started for, be it on land or sea: rowing, hurdling, cycling, running, pole-jumping, weight and hammer.” We learn too that he was the first to cycle round Syria, that he rode from Land’s End to John O' Groats and later from Carlisle to London in a day, that he rowed a home-made boat from Crosby Vicarage down the rapids of the river Eden to the sea, and that he cut the record from England to France in 1911 by rowing the Channel in 3 hours and 50 minutes. What is more, he built several flying machines and drove motor ambulances in Belgium, winning three medals. In 1917, aged 55, he cycled, walked, ran, paddled, rode and swam six consecutive half-miles in 26 minutes and 20 seconds in competition with a certain Lieutenant Muller of the Danish Army. What a vicar! What a man! Eventually he became notably eccentric and in 1937 was persuaded to retire. Committed to a mental asylum he escaped, remarried after his first wife died and finally died himself after falling off his bicycle. He should feature in our liturgical calendar as the patron saint of Anglican muscle.

Muscular Christianity

The label, philosophy and movement known as “Muscular Christianity” evolved in and sprang from English public schools in the middle of the nineteenth century. It linked Christianity to health and manliness and with its emphasis on patriotic duty, discipline, self-sacrifice, masculinity and the moral and physical beauty of athleticism, was foundational in the spread and maintenance of the British Empire. The horrors of the First World War disillusioned it into decline, though there has been something of a resurgence in the 21st century driven by the perceived “crisis of masculinity”.

Light on a dark horse

No sportsman myself, I have never had much truck with "muscular Christianity", but I am not immune to its appeal. The guiding light, guru and inspiration of my life is the courageous, revolutionary, anti authoritarian, intriguing Jesus of Nazareth, not the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild". If we are to preach love, forgiveness and mercy and also rise to the challenge of Islam, it needs to be strong, hard-edged and courageous love, forgiveness and mercy rather than the sentimental, wittering heard from too many pulpits.

It is refreshing to reread the autobiography of one of the 20th century's most virile of Christian poets, Roy Campbell. He was a hunter, fisherman, bull-fighter and a scourge and satirist of left-wing poets. He converted to Roman Catholicism, was one of very few intellectuals and poets who fought on Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War and a fine poet. His autobiography, "*Light On A Dark Horse*" is a splendid read and his translations of the poems of St John of the Cross are still considered superb. I have his *Collected Poems* on Kindle and particularly love the following, lovely lyric of gratitude and praise. The 'roller' in the first line is a beautiful bird, the "European Roller". I am more familiar with the even more beautiful, African "Lilac Breasted Roller".

Driving Cattle to Casas Buenas

The roller perched upon the wire,
Telegrams running through his toes,
At my approach would not retire
But croaked a greeting as he rose,
A telegraph of solar fire.
Girth-high the poppies and the daisies
To brush the belly of my mule:
The thyme was smoking up God's praises.
The sun was warm, the wind was cool,
The white sierra was the icy
Refrigerator of that noon
And in the air so fresh, so spicy,
So steep, so pale, Toledo's June,
The sun seemed smaller than the moon.
Wading through seas of fire and blood
(I never saw such flowers before)
I said to Apis, "What a cud
To make the bulls of Bashan roar!"
The church, with storks upon the steeple,
And scarcely could my cross be signed,
When round me came those Christian people
So hospitably clean, and kind.
Beans and Alfalfa in the manger -
Alfalfa, there was never such!
And rice and rabbit for the stranger.
Thank you very much!

Lilac breasted roller

This most attractive, swash-buckling, brawling, bullfighting, fishing, soldiering, virile man's man, Roy Campbell, is to a great extent bogus. The subject of his enjoyable autobiography, it seems is largely a self-invented myth. He was nowhere near the dare-devil he paints himself or appears to be from his verse. This adds an ironic authenticity to his attractiveness, for surely virility itself is, to a great extent, a mere act, a male fantasy, a myth.

Home