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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

July to December 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

(557) “This and That” - 13 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

St Andrew’s Cathedral - Lady Chapel

A dull game to watch is soccer, but totally engrossing. The frustrating infrequency of goals is offset by the frequency of missed, edge-of-the-seat opportunities. It’s a case of the *‘stop it, I like it’* paradox. For as long as two whole hours spectators endure wave after wave of breathless, numb-bummed suspense and unrealised expectancy. Far too often the attenuated torture of 120 goalless or near goalless minutes culminates in the hugely unsatisfactory, arbitrary, nail-biting, anti-climactic climax of a penalty shoot out.

A frisson of delight

How many of the millions who watch football, I wonder, delight in that simple gesture made by some superstar players before they take a penalty, or before they are unleashed onto the pitch as a substitute, the *sign or the cross*? I do. I love to see it. There is an instant frisson of recognition. “He’s one of us” I think to myself, “he’s a fellow Christian, may he prosper.” I love him for it.

It is the same when I read a poem and come across a stanza, or just a single line, that appears to reveal the poet to be on the side of the angels, a fair dinkum Christian. Again there’s that frisson of delighted recognition and fellow feeling. “He is one of us, part of the family” I think to myself, “a fellow Christian”, I love him for that.

Straying angels

Like the simple ‘*sign of the cross*’ gesture, a single line of verse can give the game away and reveal a poet to be more than a wordsmith and fellow human being. It can reveal him to be as well a member of the family, one of the loving and forgiving community of the faithful, a disciple of the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth, someone who finds wisdom in the “foolishness of God”.

The last line of the second stanza of a poem by Patrick Kavanagh did this for me when I read it recently, here are the first two stanzas of **In Memory of My Mother**

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday —
You meet me and you say:
‘Don't forget to see about the cattle —’
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

That last line is wondrous, lovely: “Among your earthiest words the angels stray”.

Total immersion

As the years roll on, simply to be a Christian seems more and more to be a lovely privilege. It’s not a case of an elderly person“cramming for finals”, as one of my university lecturers and friends used to claim. Fear of divine judgement has never played a significant part in my theology or faith and when it comes to the pros and cons of an ‘afterlife’, I’m almost agnostic, am content simply to trust the God

I've grown to believe in and love to bless me, and us all, with whatever is for our best. No, it has nothing to do with "cramming for finals", something else is going on.

St Andrew's Cathedral - Quire stalls

A few days ago, as is frequently the case, I sat in one of the stone-canopied, tapestry-backed and cushioned stalls of the Cathedral Quire waiting for choral Evensong to begin. Simply to be seated in such a place is to be blessed with a quietude and peace that passes all understanding. In the back row, the elaborately carved stone canopies of the stalls rest on slender columns of Purbeck marble that are deliciously and crisply cold to clasp and hold. The eyes soar upwards to architectural perfection, gothic arch upon arch pointing to a lovely ceiling. The organ footles and tootles away, tickling the ear, promising greater aural delight to follow. Once the harsh ring of the quarter hour is kicked by the medieval clock's "Quarter Jack", in glides the virger, holding out his virge like a wand, as he leads in the procession of choir and clergy. Once in their pews they face east, bow and the first words are sung not spoken: *O Lord open thou our lips*.... So begins immersion in the purest of pure forms of worship.

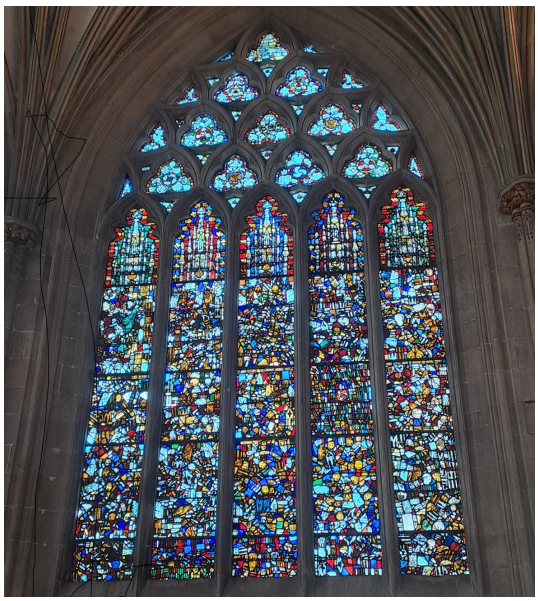
Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks

On this particular occasion the choir was from Virginia in the USA. The Cathedral choir is now on its extended summer holiday until the beginning of the autumn school term. Visiting choirs enjoy the privilege of providing music in a lovely cathedral, with any gaps filled by the fine, local Cathedral Chamber Choir.

The psalms on the weekday of which I write were the closely related number 42 and 43, beautifully and expressively sung. Psalm 42 begins: *Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God : when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?*

Those words are dear to me for I do long for God and for a God-illumined and God-enlightened world and existence. I refuse to countenance a Godless world, hence my delight to discover and encounter others, similarly fascinated and inspired by Jesus of Nazareth and who, like me, see love, sacrifice, service, forgiveness, mercy and the fulfilment and joy that arise from these virtues, as the whole point and goal of human existence. *My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God,* and what is more I love to *appear before the presence of God?* I'm a worship and God junkie.

A chaotic mosaic



St Andrew's Cathedral - Lady Chapel window

Every morning we say Matins and celebrate the Eucharist in the Cathedral's octagonal Lady Chapel. Four of its five great windows are filled with a chaotic mosaic of broken shards, fragments and splinters of stained glass. The original windows were so thoroughly shattered by puritanical zealots in the seventeenth century, they could only be reassembled as non-representational collages of colour. To gaze at them as the sun rises each morning is to gaze into a chaos that isn't quite total, that like our colourful but chaotic world offers hints and glimpses of something other, of possible order, sense and meaning. Against the odds there are shards and pieces that are representative of the reality that once upon a time was depicted in realistic detail. Here and there is a recognisable face and beyond and behind it all are silhouettes not of angels but of jackdaws and pigeons rising and falling and telling of a life and world beyond the here and now. God has a way with chaos.

(556) “This and That” - 6 July 2024

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

St Andrew’s Cathedral - early morning

The largest bumble bees in the world occur in Chile. They can be more than an inch and a half long and are known locally as “flying mice”.

Cuckoo bumblebees

There are more than 250 members of the bumble bee species worldwide, most of them, though not quite all, are native to the Northern Hemisphere at higher altitudes and higher latitudes. Fuzzy, furry, humming balls of busyness, they are hugely attractive and invaluable pollinators. Capable of stinging us, they rarely do so, unless seriously provoked. Female, nest-making bumblebees can be distinguished from parasitic cuckoo bumblebees by the hair-fringed pollen baskets on their back legs which are absent on cuckoo bumblebees.

The original English term for bumblebee was ‘humblebee’, though both terms have a pedigree that goes back to the middle ages. In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* it is humble bees, not bumblebees, and likewise in Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species*. Only from the beginning of the twentieth century did the term humble bee give way completely to the term bumble bee, due in part to the popularity of Beatrix Potter who, in the *Tale of Miss Tittlemouse,* introduces us to Babbity Bumble, the bumble bee.

Johann Nepomuk Hummel

The German word for bumblebee is ‘hummel’, an onomatopoeic word from which the English term “humble bee” appears to derive. It has nothing whatsoever to do with humility. Hummel is also a German surname and as I tap away on these matters entomological, I listen with delight to a five-hour play-list of Johann Nepomuk Hummel’s chamber music. Born in Austria (1778–1837), he was a child prodigy pupil of Mozart, Salieri and Haydn. In adulthood he was a friend of Beethoven and Schubert.

There is another Hummel affecting life in our Somerset home at present: Arvid David Hummel (1778-1836). He is an exact contemporary of the composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel, but Swedish not Austrian, an entomologist not a composer and the first to describe and identify *Tineola bisselliella,* the common “clothes moth”.

At this time of the year, no matter how absorbed I am in cooking, reading a good book, watching a television program, or listening to a piano trio by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, I am likely to be startled by a loud cry from Diana: “There’s one, there’s one. Get it, get it!” Her wish being my command, I leap up to obliterate in mid air, with a clap of my hands, a fluttering and all but invisible *tineola bisselliella*. Sometimes they are spotted stationary, perched peacefully upside down on the ceiling, whereupon, being taller than Diana, I’m called upon to squash them from tiny living moth to ceiling smudge.

It is not the moths that damage our carpets and clothes though, their mouths are atrophied. Their brief, aerial life of 15 to 30 days is preoccupied only by mating, egg laying and dying. It’s the white, near microscopic caterpillar hatchlings who wreak quiet havoc for anything from a month to two years, depending on conditions. They have a taste for keratin proteins and will munch through linen, wool, silk, cotton, cashmere, furs and even synthetic fibres if they’re blended with wool. With a particular fondness for sweat and dirt marinaded clothes and fabrics they are insatiable, omnivorous blighters, partial to hair, feathers, grain, dried milk products, rice, bran and wheat flour as well as carpets and clothes. We are vacuuming, shifting furniture, lifting carpets and eradicating them as best we can.

A wandering Aramean

Long settled in the “promised land”, Jewish farmers, on bringing the first fruits of their harvest to the temple, would look back to their nomadic past and quote the Deuteronomist: *“a wandering*

Bishops Palace Moat, Wells

Aramean was my father....".It was *" a wandering Neaum"* who was mine, he bequeathed me a taste for nomadic existence, a delight in moving on. Two substantial English vicarages by the time I was six, then three and a half years in an insubstantial and tiny one on remote Tristan da Cunha. Then there were two successive homes in the African bush for eight years, the second built by ourselves with local help. There followed a suburban home in Harare for six years and then a house in Chiswick and a bedsitter in South Kensington for a year and a half. Next came two and a half years at a theological college in South Africa and, once ordained, an apartment in central Harare for three years. This was followed by a rectory in Kadoma for four years and two and a half in the most capacious and loveliest of all my vicarage abodes on the island of St Helena. There followed four years in a rural Australian village rectory, six years, then eight years and then eleven years in the rectories of three successive Australian country towns.

Partial retirement brought me back to England for ten blissful years in a fine New Forest vicarage until now, finally and at last it is stasis, full stop. I've come to rest and gather moss in Somerset. My next move will be into Eternity's vestibule, the six-foot long, wooden box that marks the beginning of the most mysterious and exciting journey of all. A wandering Aramean of a Neaum indeed.

All of which doesn't mean that the opposite to nomadism, a settled life lived all in one place, doesn't appeal as well. I have long loved a simple poem by the peg-legged, hobo poet W H Davies, of whom one miserable, thin-gutted critic has said: "his moon is bright, his sheep are white, his lambs are woolly, his fields green, his horses dumb, and with 'pretty,' 'fair,' 'sweet,' 'sad,' 'hard' and 'soft' one is almost half-way through his vocabulary..."

Like Mozart, able to order and distil from the limited notes of a simple D major scale a heart-stoppingly, beautiful melody, so too can W H Davies from a simple vocabulary:

Sweet Stay-at-Home

Sweet Stay-at-Home, sweet Well-content,
Thou knowest of no strange continent;
Thou hast not felt thy bosom keep
A gentle motion with the deep;

Thou hast not sailed in Indian seas,
Where scent comes forth in every breeze.

Thou hast not seen the rich grape grow
For miles, as far as eyes can go:
Thou hast not seen a summer's night
When maids could sew by a worm's light;
Nor the North Sea in spring send out
Bright hues that like birds flit about
In solid cages of white ice —

Sweet Stay-at-Home, sweet Love-one-place,
Thou hast not seen black fingers pick
White cotton when the bloom is thick,
Nor heard black throats in harmony;
Nor hast thou sat on stones that lie
Flat on the earth, that once did rise
To hide proud kings from common eyes.

Thou hast not seen plains full of bloom
Where green things had such little room
They pleased the eye like fairer flowers —
Sweet Stay-at-Home, all these long hours.

Sweet Well-content, sweet Love-one-place,
Sweet, simple maid, bless thy dear face;
For thou hast made more homely stuff
Nurture thy gentle self enough;

I love thee for a heart that's kind —
Not for the knowledge in thy mind.

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