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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (March 2021)



St John's Boldre - The New Forest

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **March 2021** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website:*

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

(392) “This and That” - 21 March 2021

Shopping very early in the morning, and only fortnightly, has a great deal to commend it.

Milksops

To start with, it's safe. There are few fellow shoppers around, and for them to be out and about at such an early hour means that they're of a careful disposition. Their masks are crisp and clean, not dank, rank and noisome.

Better still, favoured items, reduced in price, have not all been snaffled. There is nearly always a delicious bargain or two to gladden the heart and water the palate. What is more, there are plenty of staff about, busy stocking shelves and easy to identify and consult.

We buy 24 pints of milk on each shopping trip. That's 3 gallons. As I lug them in a great Ikea bag from the car into the house, a great wave of empathetic sympathy for dairy cows overcomes me. My bag of milk weighs about 26 pounds. A healthy dairy cow produces between 6 and 7 gallons of milk daily. If she's milked only twice a day, it means that her udder, before milking, could well contain 30 pounds weight of milk. In fact the udders of top dairy cows can contain up to 50 pounds weight of milk. Wow.

The invention of mechanical milking was a great time-saving boon. To milk six cows by hand takes about an hour. Machines can relieve a hundred cows of their milk in the same amount of time. They also dispel bovine coyness of the sort described in the old music hall rhyme:

The Recalcitrant Cow

In Huddersfield in Huddersfield
There was a cow that wouldn't yield
The reason that she wouldn't yield
She didn't like her udders feelled.

After Easter, with the Lenten drought broken, I hope to lug into the Vicarage 24 pints of beer in a great Ikea bag, Diana permitting. Whereupon a great wave of empathetic sympathy for brewers and publicans is likely to overcome me. I will whole-heartedly play my part in drinking them back to their pre-pandemic prosperity.

Off early to bed

The past year's confinement to home and our own devices has meant we've watched more television and films. For better or worse, then, we've been more thoroughly exposed to the culture in which we live. I have stepped out of my favoured seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to paddle around in the twenty first, as vividly revealed in films and television box-sets. For the most part what we've watched has been gripping, absorbing and brilliantly acted. It has also been foul-mouthed, sexually explicit, graphically violent, cynical and if not antipathetic to Christianity and what it stands for, entirely unaware or disregarding of it. We are not prudes at the Vicarage. We can take it. We send our Christian world view and susceptibilities off to bed early.

Last week, however, we happened upon a slight film called “This Beautiful Fantastic”. No cynicism, graphic violence, explicit sex, foul language or proselytising for libertinism. Sentimental? Yes. Twee? Possibly, but also refreshing, uplifting and lovely. Though it too was devoid of explicit religion, our Christian susceptibilities and world view were untroubled and allowed to stay up late. It was refreshing.

Not the love song of J Alfred Prufrock

It is now over a year since we had anyone in to dine or dined out with anyone else. What a deprivation. To share a meal is to make love: friendship love, familial love, agapeic love. It was a shared meal in an upper room that gave us our faith. In a favourite poem, J Alfred Prufrock says “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons...” I prefer to measure out mine in memorable dinners. There are thousands to be recollected fondly.

Perhaps best of all, and over many years, Sunday roasts at 89 Enterprise Road in Rhodesia. My mother, mistress of the kitchen, beaming with family pride, a glass of wine to hand, a cigarette in her mouth, roasting to perfection, in the dripping of a huge leg of lamb, swags of extra potatoes to distribute

before the meal. A highly appreciated foretaste of good things to come. Sister Sue's husband Bob, afire with jokes, my father's Sunday sermon fondly pulled to pieces by his two sons and occasionally even praised. Witticisms airborne, grandchildren afoot, heaven all round.

(391) "This and That" - 14 March 2021

Along Church Lane there's an oak tree suffering from a skin wound. A great blaze of bark has been nibbled out of it. It's a wound inflicted with artistry and good taste. A lancet window of russet brown, randomly flecked with bright, white dashes and gashes. About a foot wide, it stretches up from near the ground about eight feet. The artistic culprit, we are told, is a bored horse.

Fatal boredom

We first noticed the wound when newly inflicted. There were no pieces or crumbs of bark littering the ground around, so presumably they'd been ingested. Not good news. Oak trees are bad tucker for horses. Their toxins cause gastro-intestinal distress, diarrhoea, depression and even death. Boredom in horses can prove fatal.

Sitting at my desk writing this article I am very far from bored. Though once I've exhausted a topic and am stuck for another then, like a bored horse, I get up and roam around looking for something to nibble. As often as not a handful of raw oats suffices, with a pinch of sugar. Once wuffed down, inspiration returns.

In my bearded youth, in a cassock, and about to be ordained a priest, a photograph was taken of me standing beside my similarly bearded and cassocked father. Published in the local paper it elicited from an old friend, "You look like a pair of bald, bearded horses". Indeed.

Maintaining the fabric of the world

What is prayer? There are many sophisticated definitions, but they all boil down to something simple. It's an expression of love. Love of God. Love of neighbour.

Love, though, is so much more than misty-eyed emoting, delirious dalliance and dreamy protestation. Its true mettle is manifested in action. So too with prayer.

There's a passage in the Book Ecclesiasticus which waxes lyrical about craftsmen. Of the blacksmith it says:

.....he sets his heart of finishing his handiwork, and he is careful to complete its decoration. So it is with the potter, sitting at his work and turning the wheel with his feet; he is always deeply concerned over his products, and he produces them in quantity. He moulds the clay with his arm and makes it pliable with his feet; he sets his heart to finish the glazing, and he takes care in firing the kiln. All craftsmen rely on their hands, and all are skilful in their own work. Without them no city can be inhabited, and wherever they live, they will not go hungry...they maintain the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the exercise of their trade.

It is a passage I have used at funerals many times over the years. To *maintain the fabric of the world is to be about God's business*, whether you believe or not. For such folk, *their prayer is in the exercise of their trade*.

Holding up the world

U A Fanthorpe in talking of "sensible love" in her poem "Atlas", echo's perfectly Ecclesiasticus' talk of *prayer as the exercise of ...trade*. It also, to my amusement and delight, epitomises Diana almost perfectly:

ATLAS

There is a kind of love called maintenance,
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;

Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;

Which answers letters; which knows the way
The money goes, which deals with dentists
And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,
And postcards to the lonely; which upholds
The permanently rickety elaborate
Structures of living; which is Atlas.

And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
Which knows what time and weather are doing
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
Laughs at my dryrotten jokes; remembers
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in the air,
As Atlas did the sky.

(390) “This and That” - 7 March 2021

There’s not enough hypocrisy about. Some people are so nasty it’s their duty to pretend to be otherwise.

The appearance of things

There’s hypocrisy and hypocrisy, of course. My hero, Jesus of Nazareth, vehemently and correctly inveighed against pharisaical hypocrisy, but John le Carré puts forward a good and philosophically acute case for the “sin”:

I am a hypocrite. I am a great believer in hypocrisy. It is the nearest we ever get to virtue. It is a statement of what we ought to be. Like religion, like art, like the law, like marriage, I serve the appearance of things.

A parish priest needs to be something of a hypocrite. Not infrequently pastoral sensitivity and politeness demand an attentive and sympathetic response to unattractive and unacceptable views. Instead of shouting “Rubbish” it has to be “Yes, yes, but.....” or even a cowardly, non-judgemental and therefore hypocritical silence. Samuel Butler (1835-1902) penned a salty little verse on hypocrisy:

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy will serve as well
To propagate a church, as zeal;
As persecution and promotion
Do equally advance devotion:
So round white stones will serve, they say,
As well as eggs to make hens lay.

Crumpets

Empathy with our ageing little tin of dried yeast, used in breadmaking, persuaded me that it was world-weary and tired. To be the bubble, fizz and effervescence of all you come in contact with is enervating. Our yeast needed using up and replacing with a new tin. So I looked back to Tristan da Cunha and my mother’s triumphs and tribulations with ageing yeast there in the nineteen fifties and decided to make some crumpets. My resourceful father made her some rings from cut-down pineapple chunk tins. I ordered a set from Amazon and found a recipe online.

Just yeast, flour, milk, water, salt, a teaspoon of sugar, that’s all. How easy. How basic. How unutterably delicious when slathered and smothered with melting butter.

What happens to us after death?

Most of us wonder what happens to our personality, and essential self when we die. There’s no

way of knowing. That's why we wonder. My own conclusion, such as it is, is that we fall into the abyss of non-existence but, being Christian and with Jesus' resurrection in mind, trust that a Creator who called a universe into being, from just such an abyss, might well do the same for us in a new creation. To get to know the Creator, through his Christ and by living his Gospel of love, brings with it a confidence that whatever ensues will be for the best.

For poignancy, longing and love and with a perfectly judged last line (though not for any literal truth whatsoever) it's hard to beat Charles Causley's:

EDEN ROCK

They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Eden Rock:
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.

My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.

She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw
Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.

The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,

They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, 'See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.'

I had not thought that it would be like this.

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