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BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (October 2021)



St John's Boldre in October

*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 **October 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>

(424) “This and That” - 31 October 2021

Heavy with child and a couple of weeks overdue, my daughter in London sent me a message last week: “On our last cryptic crossword one of the answers was terpsichore - we didn’t get it and thought it was outrageous, because who would know that word? Then there it is in your pew sheet a day later!!!”

Happy hedonistic years

It is a word I’ve known since 1965 when I left my bush boarding school to begin an English degree at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Back at home with my parents for four years, and then for another two, I and my father, both music mad, began to build a decent record collection. One purchase, on our much favoured *Archive* label, was a selection of High Renaissance Dances. The disk’s A-side comprised items from Michael Praetorius’ collection of 300 dances called *Terpsichore*, the name, in Greek mythology, of the Muse of dance.

Out in the boondocks of Africa the disk blew our minds. In those happy, hedonistic years I learned and retained more from record sleeves than lectures.

Michael Praetorius, 1571-1621, is best known today for the lovely harmony he supplied to that most exquisite of Christmas carols: *Lo, how a rose e'er blooming*. Born Michael Schultze, he was the youngest son of a Lutheran Pastor. The name Schultze means “village judge” or “magistrate”. Praetorius is the name’s medieval, lingua franca Latin form.

Hello darkness my old friend

In 1965, the year I went to university, rather different pieces of music delighted me too. One of them was the song that begins:

*Hello darkness my old friend
I've come to talk with you again....*

In that year Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” was beginning to make it’s mark, a lovely melody with well matched, beautifully harmonising voices and also intriguingly, enigmatic words. Listening to it today brings my youthful self and that more hopeful era vividly back to heart and mind. It remains a great favourite. I still warm too to the young Art Garfunkel with his Afro-style hair and the baby-faced Paul Simon, they seemed decent sorts.

The song, says Simon, was written with the help of a guitar in his bathroom. There he closed the door and turned off the lights to concentrate, the tiled room, a resonant echo chamber.... *Hello darkness my old friend....*”

Listening several times to the song again today, while following the words, my pernickety self notes a fault found in some hymns. The melody forces emphasis on words too slight to bear the stress. Unlike in Henry Purcell, words and music are not a perfect match. It’s a beautiful song though, now considered “the quintessential folk rock release”.

Give happenstance a chance

Too well ordered and predictable a life won’t do. Happenstance and serendipity need to play a part. Take shopping online. It necessitates knowing exactly what we want. As too, it seems, does online dating. Yet what we do not want can be what we really do want, at a level we are too dim fully to realise. I would never have found Diana if I had listed my preferences online, nor she me.

At the Vicarage we do shop online, now and then, for specific items. Not for our general groceries though. Once a fortnight we enjoy wandering the supermarket with a crammed trolley. It’s what is not on the shopping list and yet bought that makes it a creative adventure.

For similar reasons I could never be content with a sole diet of online worship, vital though such worship is to the housebound. After church last Sunday, chatting over coffee outside with some of the very best of fellow worshippers, they began to talk of the trials and tribulations of growing old. What joy to be able to quip: “There are compensations you know. At least the end is in sight.”

(423) “This and That” - 24 October 2021

Early on Australian mornings, with only one of my buttocks supported by a shared piano stool with my daughter, I grew to love the music of Johann Vanhal. My daughter too loved his melodic little sonatas that she needed to master to pass her piano exams. I sat with her to encourage perseverance.

Sitting below the salt

Vanhal was an eighteenth century Czech. Born into serfdom, he soon freed himself as an adult to become one of the first notable composers to break from “sitting-below-the-salt” at a rich man’s table. He had talent and independence of spirit sufficient to support himself as a teacher and performer. He composed not at the behest of a patron but on commission or for publication. As I write I am listening to his violin concertos. Violins are exquisite instruments.

An eighteenth century traffic jam

To celebrate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle that ended the Austrian War of Succession, George II commissioned music from Handel to accompany a fireworks show. The King, no lover of violins, demanded that there be “no fiddles” in the piece. So there were not.

Handel’s music was a huge success. Six days before the firework display, at a rehearsal in Vauxhall Gardens, a crowd of over 12,000, at half a crown apiece, caused a three-hour traffic jam of carriages on London Bridge. On the actual day of celebration the fireworks were something of a flop. Rain caused firing mishaps. A pavilion caught fire, a stray rocket set a woman’s clothes alight, two soldiers were burned and a third blinded. The music, though, was once again rapturously received. It’s remained popular ever since.

A terpsichorean terror

When is a violin not a violin? When it goes demotic to play music of the hoi poloi. Then it becomes a fiddle. Fiddles are violins used in folk, bluegrass, hootenanny, hill-billy and country dance music. They remain violins in all but name, though often with steel rather than gut strings.

I’m as crazy about fiddle music as classical violin music. In one of my Australian parishes we Scottish country danced to disks by a fine Canadian band whose virtuosic fiddling sent me ecstatic. I became a whirling dervish, a Dionysian demoniac, a terpsichorean terror. As I write this I’ve forsaken Vanhal to listen to the band. It has compelled me to leave my desk and fling myself around the study.

Footfalls hazardous

As we become older we find beauty, God, meaning, truth and joy less and less in theology, philosophy and logic. Instead we turn to music, art and poetry. Hence my delight on discovering this poem by John Drinkwater:

The Dying Philosopher to his Fiddler

Come, fiddler, play one tune before I die.

Philosophy is barren, and I lie

Untouched now by the plagues of all the schools,

And only silly fiddlers are not fools.

Bring then your bow, and on the strings let be,

In this last hour, merely the melody

Of waves and leaves and footfalls hazardous,

Where crafty logic shall not keep with us.

The patient fields of knowledge did I sow;

I have done with knowledge — for I nothing know,

Wisdom and folly set their faces hence,

And in their eyes a twin-intelligence.

Only your notes may quick again the keen

Tree-shadows cut upon the paddock's green.

The pools where mirrored branches are at rest,
The heron lifting to her windy nest.

And these are things that know not argument;
Come, fiddler, play; philosophy is spent.
Out of my thought the chiding doctors slip,
And you are now the only scholarship.

The word 'quick' as in the Apostle's Creed, means: living, alive.

(422) “This and That” - 17 October 2021

It is disconcerting to be eyed off by a chameleon. The upper and lower eyelids of their protruding, swivelling eye sockets are fused, leaving an aperture no larger than a pinhole. From which a sharp, gleaming pupil pierces through into your very soul.

Miniature perfection

In my first Rhodesian parish, digging in the garden one day, I unearthed a cache of soft-skinned chameleon eggs. I gathered a handful and reburied them in a carton of moist soil, to keep and watch on my study windowsill. The eggs of the local chameleons there take between ten and twelve months to hatch. A good reason for mother to lay them in moist earth, rather than in a nest to be sat upon. To my joy the eggs did indeed come to fruition. Each hatchling emerged from the soil in miniature perfection. We released them round and about our garden.

In those long ago and happy days, if we encountered adult chameleons in the bushes of the rectory garden, we sometimes entertained ourselves by placing them in the middle of the lawn. There, to our delight, with pin-point eyed, pin-point accuracy they zapped grasshoppers by shooting out their great, long sticky tongues.

Prehensile and zygodactylic

The word chameleon is from the Greek *khamalos* meaning *on the ground, creeping* or *diminutive*, and *leon*, for *lion*. Wondrous diminutive lions indeed, they make popular pets. Their tails, like giraffes' tongues, elephants' noses and sturgeons' lips are prehensile. Their feet, like those of woodpeckers and parrots are zygodactylic. Their tongues, when extended, are twice the length of their body.

Most notable of all is their ability to vary the coloration and pattern of their skin through combinations of pink, blue, red, orange, green, black, brown, light blue, yellow, turquoise, and purple. Not only as camouflage, but also to regulate body temperature or indicate anger or serenity.

Priests as chameleons

To be an effective parish priest requires chameleonic characteristics. It is both wise and politic for us, sometimes, to vary the colour of our churchmanship according to the parish in which we find ourselves.

In my last parish we filled the church with incense on high days and holy. Sanctuary bells were vigorously jangled at important points during the Eucharist and at the church entrance there was a holy water stoup in which to dip your fingers and cross yourself. We sprinkled holy water at every opportunity. There were plentiful icons and statues about the church too and, in the Lady Chapel, in front of the blessed Virgin Mary, a sand-filled bowl for candles to be lit and placed by the devout. The Eucharist was celebrated every day of the week, even on my day off, and on major Saints' days there were extra celebrations of the Eucharist. I was “Father Andrew” to most parishioners.

High jynx

How different it all seems here in St John's, Boldre. It can be difficult sometimes to recognise myself. Yet there has been no fundamental change of direction for me. As with a chameleon it is only skin deep. I am as at home here as I was there.

For although worship at St John's is not “high”, it is highly ordered. A huge amount of

preparation goes into making sure that things flows naturally from beginning to end and that our worship, in its modest way, is beautiful and altogether worthy of the God to whom it is directed.

We are “High” in style and purpose. What is ad hoc, hesitant, fumbled or crass has little or no place. In a building of exceptional loveliness, with a fine organist, four part choir and ordered worship, spirits are lifted Godwards as easily without high jynx as with them. Deo gratias.

(421) “This and That” - 10 October 2021

Parsons specialise in *casting bread upon water*. It’s what we do. All the time.

Chewing it over

The advice, *Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days*, comes from Ecclesiastes. It’s an odd metaphor. Throw bread upon fresh water and it’s likely to be gobbled up by ducks, upon seawater by gulls. If not it dissipates and dissolves into food for fish. Maybe that’s the point. *Its return*, after many days, is not as mere bread, but as far more substantial meat or fish.

Way back in 1974 I was made a deacon in my home church in Rhodesia. I was priested eight months later. Ever since, I’ve been casting the Gospel’s bread upon water. Throwing it here, there and everywhere, discussing, speaking, writing, arguing, teaching and preaching the faith.

It has been with very little obvious return. Except in myself. For while casting the bread of the Gospel upon the water, I’ve all the while been ruminatively chewing it over, swallowing and digesting it to my own good. Every sermon I’ve preached has been as much to clarify and make sense of the faith to myself, as to others. If by now I don’t know my own mind and faith, I’m unlikely ever to do so.

Why do I exist?

Over the past few weeks there have been two, rare examples of bread I’ve cast upon the waters making a return. The first was from a dying woman to whom I was called to bless and reassure. She termed herself a “reverential agnostic”, professing a deep love for the church she’d grown up in, but unable to believe it’s faith as taught to her in her youth. She invited me to *cast my bread upon the waters*, to thumbnail the faith, as understood by me.

Though glad to do so, I’m always a tad embarrassed at the simplistic nature of the Faith as honed down, interpreted and loved by myself. For to me it’s essence doesn’t lie in doctrine, dogma, piety or even practice. Instead it lies in a simple, radical, moral choice arising from the Cross’s answer to the greatest of all questions: “Why do I exist?”

The answer is not to be successful, celebrated, wealthy, admired, clever, pious, long-lived or even happy. Rather it is to learn to love, sacrificially. That is, to die to self and selfishness in learning to love the other and others. To be truly Christian, is to stake your very life on the truth of that answer and actually live by it. All the rest, often helpful, possibly true and for the most part lovely, is of relatively minor importance. As for dying, who knows? We let go of existence trusting that the God of love, revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, will do what’s best for us. Perhaps, as creator of universes, he’ll call us back to love and be loved in a New Creation. We trust that all will be well.

This simplistic account of the faith, it seems, enabled the dying woman to return home, relieved, to belief. Two days later, buoyant, she rang to ask for Holy Communion.

Bread cast upon the waters does indeed, just now and then, return. In the same week I received a remarkable, handwritten letter from a bride. At one of our interviews I had reduced and encapsulated the faith much as above. Her letter thanked me for nudging her closer to an appreciative understanding of Christianity. She had been inspired, she said, to begin to set out and explore her spirituality in depth. “.....it started with your few, simple words. They were deafening and beautiful.....”

Toads and churchyards

One of our daily poems last week was Larkin’s “Toads Revisited”. Its last two lines took us back to the year 2010 and a churchyard in Lacock. There, on a bench, as we ate egg sandwiches, with me already in my mid sixties, I asked Diana to marry me. Would I have been accepted, we wondered, had I proposed with Larkin’s lines:

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

(420) “This and That” - 3 October 2021

Shop windows make flattering mirrors. By reflecting darkly they minimise blemishes.

No stoop, hunch or belly

In his poem *The Elixir*, George Herbert reminds us that:

A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye,
Or if he pleaseth through it pass
And there the heavens espy.

For me, as a young man, window shopping involved staying my eye on glass rather than through it. In the dark reflections of plate glass I could fancy myself as cutting a fine figure. Six foot and half and inch tall, a head of long blond hair, and no trace of a stoop, hunch or belly. Wow!

Not so these days. I allow my eye to pass through the window's glass to what lies beyond. Should the eye stay momentarily on the glass, I'm relieved if I've had the good sense to be wearing clothes loose enough to disguise any falling away from physical perfection.

I read recently that leotards are no longer favoured for practising ballet dancers. They're too revealing of the odd bumps and lumps sported by transgender dancers. Looser fitting gear for all is demanded. Very charitable.

A bloody vignette

It is odd that to be thrown or fall out of a window should have its very own word: “defenestration”. There are two biblical examples. In a bloodily detailed vignette, King Ahab's wife Jezebel is thrown from a high window at the request of her husband's successor Jehu. Her bloodied corpse is left to be eaten by dogs while he dines.

The New Testament's defenestration is less gory. St Paul, three storeys up in Troas one evening, sermonises at such great length that a young man called Eutychus falls asleep by a window and drops to his death. Embraced by St Paul he recovers, and all are “not a little comforted”.

In 1618 the non-fatal defenestration of three Roman Catholic officials from Prague Castle by a Protestant mob, sparked the Thirty Years War. It was one of the most destructive of all European conflicts. I studied it in some detail and with little joy for my A levels.

Home of the black cockatoo

If sleep is elusive at night, instead of dully and futilely counting sheep, it's far better and more rewarding to recall some of the windows we've delighted to look through in our time.

In Australia, the kitchen window of the rectory in Ararat, rarely failed to lift the spirits. It framed lovely *Mount Langi Ghiran*, a name meaning “home of the black cockatoo” in the local aboriginal language .

On the Island of St Helena, the upstairs bedroom windows of St Paul's Vicarage, 1,700 feet above sea level, looked out over trees, a great fort and the glittering South Atlantic Ocean to a horizon fifty or more miles away.

The View from the Window

Like a painting it is set before one,
But less brittle, ageless; these colours
Are renewed daily with variations
Of light and distance that no painter
Achieves or suggests. Then there is movement,
Change, as slowly the cloud bruises
Are healed by sunlight, or snow caps
A black mood; but gold at evening
To cheer the heart. All through history
The great brush has not rested,

Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,
Looking coolly, or, as we now,
Through the tears' lenses, ever saw
This work and it was not finished?

Here R.S. Thomas suggests that although the world is forever unfinished, at any given moment it is perfect.

Home