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FROM BEHIND THE STAIRWELL BALUSTRADE

January to June 2026



Wells Cathedral from the East

With gratitude and many regrets, the Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum retired as the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice, on the edge of the New Forest, at the end of January 2023. His new home, with Diana his wife, is in the heart of Wells, in Somerset, a mere 5 minute walk from the Cathedral.

The articles that follow are the continuation of his weekly pew-sheet ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations, now written in his study, on the landing behind the stairwell’s balustrade, of his home in Wells.

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

(647) “This and That” - 12 April 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints Harate (Salisbury)

There are two bishops I remember with particular affection. As it happens, both of them were six foot four in height, Oxford-educated, closely associated with Salisbury Cathedral, and, at the late age of forty-six, married admirable wives.

Stoned to death with marshmallows

I was priested in Salisbury Cathedral in 1975 and was on its staff for three years. The Bishop who ordained me there was the one who, three years before, while I was supply teaching in London, had arranged for me to attend a selection conference in Woking to test the authenticity of my vocation to the priesthood. He was a quiet and effective bishop, always kindly in his dealings with me; soon after I was priested, he appointed me a member of his advisory ‘Senate’—a rookie among diocesan bigwigs. I accompanied him once on a long and fraught car journey to deliver supplies to protected villages in the guerrilla-haunted, landmine-planted, and very beautiful Honde Valley. His name was John Paul Burroughs (1916–2003), Bishop of

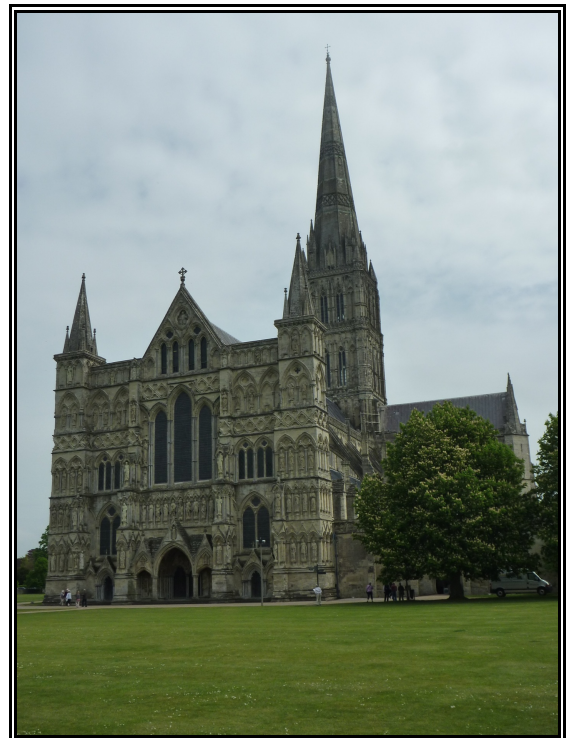
Mashonaland, the see city of which was Salisbury, Rhodesia.

In the Royal Signals during World War II, he was captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore and interned in Changi and then—by way of one of the “hell ships” to Japan—in the POW camp, Omi. His courageous leadership in the camps earned him an MBE in 1946. He stood on his head every morning and recited the Te Deum, he once told me. To be called into his office for a dressing-down, according to one of his Deans, was like ‘being stoned to death with marshmallows’, and the same Dean’s nickname for so tall a bishop was ‘The Purple-Headed Mountain’.

Exciting an atheist with foolishness

The second six-foot-four, Oxonian bishop to whom I owe much was John Austin Baker (1928–2014). He was a notable biblical scholar and, for fourteen years, Fellow, Chaplain, and Lecturer in Divinity at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. In 1978, he became Rector of St Margaret’s, Westminster, and Speaker’s Chaplain. In 1980, while I was on long leave from Zimbabwe with my family, I got to know him briefly. We were staying in a cosy little house in Chelsea owned by our missionary society, and so, on Sundays, I attended St Margaret’s to hear him preach, having been profoundly influenced by his book, *The Foolishness of God*. Published in 1970, it became, and remains, something of an Anglican classic.

When I asked for the book in Salisbury, Rhodesia, its title excited an atheist bookseller there—but only because she was ignorant of its source, St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians: ‘*The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and*



The Cathedral of St Mary, Salisbury, Wiltshire



All Saints Cathedral, Harare, interior

fortified, too, by the arguments and writings of C. S. Lewis, and reassured by revered, high-calibre fellow Christians like T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Charles Williams, and Thomas Merton.

The historical Jesus

Theological colleges can be intense and febrile institutions. The objective analysis of scripture and of church doctrine calls both into question, challenging and even undermining belief. In my case, it began to expose the superficiality of my confidence and to arouse healthy and serious questioning. It prompted an urgent quest to make coherent sense of the Gospels' different accounts of the intriguing Jesus of Nazareth; Baker's *The Foolishness of God* helped me to do so. It is a beautifully lucid, closely argued book of just over 400 pages in three parts: (1) *The Ultimate Question*, (2) *Jesus of Nazareth*, and (3) *What Then Must We Do?*

Part (1) discusses the origins of religion, the "rational acceptability" of God in relation to modern science and—best of all—offers as close to a satisfying answer to the problem of evil as it is possible to get. It was Part (2), though, that liberated me back to whole-hearted belief. It argues, with minutely close and perceptive attention to the Gospel texts, that the Church's insistence on the omniscience and omnipotence of Jesus is wrong and loses sight of the real man.

A truly human incarnation has to include human limitations, such as a lack of "unnatural knowledge." Jesus' ignorance of certain facts, his sense of forsakenness, and his feelings of failure in Gethsemane and on the cross are exactly what makes him a "true incarnation," rather than a divine being merely pretending to be human. The very limited but demonstrably authentic sayings and knowledge of the actual historical, and so very human, Jesus of Nazareth are far closer to what an incarnation ought to be than the "magical deity" too often presented by the Church.

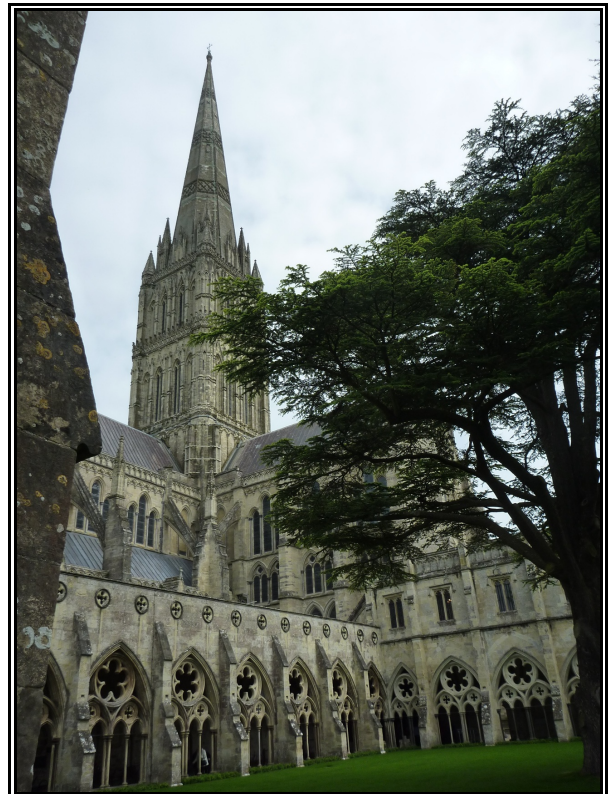
It's God the ought to crucify

In a Sydney Carter song one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus says:

*It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me
I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree.*

*To hell with Jehovah, to the carpenter I said,
I wish that a carpenter had made the world instead.
Goodbye and good luck to you, our ways will soon divide,
Remember me in heaven, the man you hung beside.*

I love that, because, sweet irony of ironies, in the fullest of senses, it was indeed God they were crucifying. He's the truest portrait we have of the Divine.



St Mary's Cathedral, Salisbury, Wiltshire

the weakness of God is stronger than men.' His sermons were as thought-provoking as the book. He later became the Bishop of Salisbury in Wiltshire and, for several years, was chairman of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission.

I returned to Southern Africa to attend St Paul's Theological College in Grahamstown in 1972, as an ordinand of the Diocese of Mashonaland. I was a cocksure, argumentative and superficially undoubting Christian—the product of vicarages and mission stations, buoyed by several life-changing mystical (or near-mystical) experiences in my twenties. I was

(646) “This and That” - 5 April 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



The Easter Vigil, Wells Cathedral 2025

What happened in the tomb between Good Friday night and early Sunday morning? To that body, that corpse, that cold, cold carcass in the dark, dark tomb, wrapped up, rolled up, bound and shrouded?

A resuscitated undertaker

Did the corpse resuscitate? Like Lazarus, did it sit up, though bound and bandaged and then twist, wriggle and writhe itself free of funereal wrappings, neatly fold them, find more comely clothes to wear, move the stone and clear off to hide somewhere more congenial? Of course not. We are not celebrating a resuscitated corpse at Easter, such corpses are unremarkable.

I have met several. One of them was an

undertaker, a splendid fellow. He had been dead for several minutes in hospital, the only undertaker in Australia to have been over to the other side and come back with firsthand knowledge as to where he was dispatching us all. Resuscitated corpses are unremarkable. They live again, only to bleed again, and die again. They don't require the level of celebration that Jesus' resurrection elicits from us.

What happened to the corpse?

So what did happen in the tomb between Good Friday night and early Sunday morning? To that body, that corpse, that cold, cold carcass, wrapped up, rolled up, bound and shrouded? What happened, that is so worthy of celebration?

We don't know. It's beyond human ken. Beyond death's full stop. We've come to the very edge, to the extreme margin of historical human existence. To where time smashes head on into eternity and dies. There's discontinuity, dislocation, mystery; history ends, time ends, space ends, we're looking out to and beyond where eyes and senses can penetrate. To where the Jesus of history gives way to the Jesus of faith.

Ambiguously, inexplicably, oddly

To describe the three short days leading up to Jesus' death the writers of the four Gospels, give us all of 469 verses. Compelling, vivid, unforgettable narrative. To describe the much longer not merely three but all of fifty days after his death, they use just 149 verses, also compelling, but so different, mysterious, elusive, strange.

It is difficult to write of things beyond our ken. After the death, after the tomb the eternal, the transcendent, the other, is manifesting itself in our time-bound world. Of necessity, mysteriously, ambiguously, inexplicably, oddly.

The risen Jesus is different, different, different. He doesn't wander Palestine healing the sick, enchanting the crowds with parables, opening doors on publicans and sinners to talk and laugh and eat with them. Opening doors for broken people into love, acceptance and wholeness.

The risen Jesus is different, different, different, appears only to those who've dearly loved him. Doors have become immaterial. Mary



Diana's Simnel Cake



St John's Boldre: Easter Garden

Magdalene doesn't recognise him, until love, enunciated in two syllables, "Mary", opens her heart. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus don't recognise him, until at table he breaks bread with them. The disciples in the boat don't recognise him on the beach, until Peter is granted a flash of insight.

Not the Jesus of Nazareth of old

After the tomb we are most certainly dealing with Jesus, but with Jesus not quite, nor exactly the Jesus of Nazareth of old. Not with a crudely 'physical' resurrection, then, something far more mysterious and thrilling is happening.

In the words of St Paul, Jesus was sown a physical body and raised a spiritual body. A spiritual body, it's a contradiction in terms, he's utterly unique. A new creation, the first fruits of a new creation, of what is to be, the Kingdom to come.

What happened in the tomb, between Good Friday night and early Sunday morning? To that body, that corpse, that cold, cold carcass? Wrapped up, rolled up, bound and shrouded?

Discombobulating

We don't know. It's beyond human ken. Beyond death's full stop. We've come to the very edge, to the very margin of historical human existence. To where time smashes headlong into eternity and dies, but something happened, something happened. For fifty strange, spine-tingling days, Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of history, lingers mysteriously, appears ambiguously, loiters enchantingly, hangs out differently, speaks lovingly: "Mary."

It is discombobulating, utterly transforming. It turns upside down, inside out, those who loved him, turns their grief to joy, fear to courage, hesitancy to confidence. It so fills them with his very Spirit that his risen body, his spiritual body is no longer required, is no longer necessary in this old creation, because the disciples, animated by his Spirit, are now his body, his physicality in space time, in history.

Wrapped up, rolled up, bound and shrouded

The body of Christ, today is loving forgiving community, is the Church wherever it is authentic, is you and me, insofar and inasmuch, as we allow ourselves to be inspired, enspirited with Jesus of Nazareth. Compassionate, accepting, inclusive, forgiving, turning the cheek, walking the second mile.



Easter Day, St Nicholas' Pilley

What happened in the tomb between Good Friday night and early Sunday morning? To that body, that corpse, that cold, cold carcass? Wrapped up, rolled up, bound and shrouded?

We don't know. It's beyond human ken. Beyond death's full stop. We've come to the very edge, to the extreme margin of historical human existence. To where time smashes head-on into eternity and dies, yes, smashes head-on into eternity and dies. Time dies. Jesus lives. Alleluia.

(645) “This and That” - 29 March 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

A life free from stress and anxiety is a mixed blessing. Too easily it lulls us into lethargy, idleness and torpor. Stress and anxiety are valuable motivators. At only one period of my life did stress and anxiety all but overwhelm me. In 2003 I composed a little ditty that by articulating the problem helped solve it:

A Parish Priest's Lament

*How happy is the artisan
The labourer, the working man.
He downs his tools at end of day
Forgets his work, to sport and play,
To let his hair down, booze and feast.*

*Not so his troubled parish priest.
His work is never left behind,
But dogs his footsteps, fills his mind,*

*Is even taken into bed
To fill his sleep with gloom and dread,
And turn to nightmare every dream.
Never, ever does it seem,
To let him go, or loose its grip,
Be abandoned, or let slip.*

*It clings to him, the poor sod,
As desperately as he to God!*



St Paul's Cathedral, London

Retirement has all but eliminated anxiety and stress, though happily not quite entirely. There are deadlines still to be met and myriad large and small tasks about the house still waiting to be done. They arouse low level anxiety only though, urging me on to achieve this and that. They don't keep me awake.

Three driving dynamos

In 1990 my mother died in Brisbane, leaving my father a widower. A year later, not long after I was appointed Rector of Ararat, a country town about 60 miles north west of Ballarat, he drove down to join me there to live in the Curate's house. At the time he would have been about 79 and was still remarkably active,

eloquent and alert. For ten years he became a sort of “house for duty curate” for me. It meant that for a decade my parishes, two of them, were more than doubly fortunate. For the price of one priest they had three. Both my first wife Margaret and my second, Diana, were hugely and effectively active in parish life and highly regarded. Our parishes, driven by three dynamos, hummed with activity.

I was born to be a parish priest and fondly imagine myself to have been a more than reasonably successful one. If that is indeed so, then it is not because I am impressively pious, deeply learned, hugely intelligent, admirably eloquent, hilariously humorous, or even horrendously hard working, but rather and merely because I was just one of an excellent and supportive family team.

The common touch

In 1996 I moved from the parish of Holy Trinity, Ararat to the parish of St John's Wodonga and my father followed us. The curate's house in Wodonga was already occupied by a very fine and experienced assistant priest and so my father rented a modest flat very close to the church and continued to preach, visit, sing in the choir and earn a place in the hearts of parishioners. For the



St Paul's Cathedral, London



All Saints' Church, Martock, Somerset

last year of his life, as he became increasingly frail, he moved into the Rectory with us and died there on 28 December 2001, in his own bed, at the age of 89.

Now that I too am in my eighties I think of him a good deal. He was an admirable father and a good and successful parish priest, with an excellent sense of humour and the common touch, though far stricter and more opinionated than ever I have been, or so I imagine. He became softer, more open, tolerant and liberal as he aged though. If you can no longer be admired and appreciated for your vigour, panache, success and derring do, then the next best thing, perhaps, is to work at becoming a sweet, tolerant, kindly good listener and lovable old man.

Chickweed

He was the first person to die in my own home. The second was my first wife, Margaret, eight years later, in the Rectory of my next parish, courageously with heartbreaking acceptance. Neither of the two rectories was particularly old and so these two deaths might well have been their first. Really old houses, such as the one we now own, live in and love, are certain to have witnessed many more. It wasn't until about 1950 that dying in hospitals became the norm.

The 200 year old bedroom where Diana and I sleep is likely to have witnessed many a final breath and commendatory prayer. With the sun streaming in on a sunny afternoon I can think of no better place to depart this world. When we first looked the little house over it was still warm with the presence of its recently deceased owner, a long retired, much loved and admired Dean of the Cathedral. Although he had died in hospital, his clerical robes, furniture, pictures and books were still there. No need for a house blessing, the place breathed godliness and goodness.



All Saints' Martock interior

We get used to life without those we've loved and who have died, but never quite totally. I recently picked up a book I had once given to my first wife, Margaret. In it I had written the word "Chickweed", my pet name for her. I was undone. The poet Simon Darragh (1944 – 2023) gets it right:

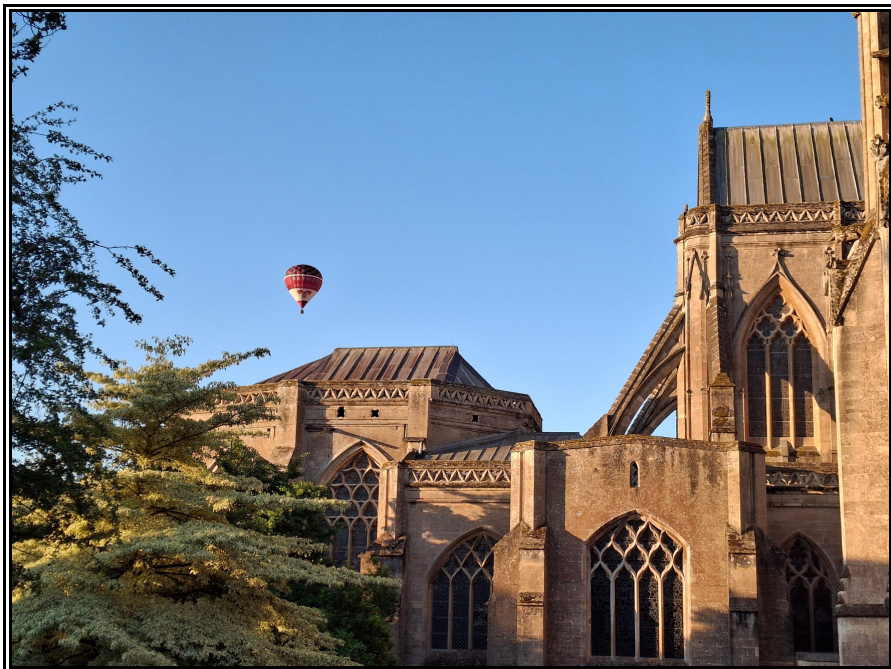
The usual subject

*One grows used to the loss itself;
it is the details catch, and scourge:
the extra tea-cup on the shelf;
the kitchen table, grown too large.*

*Not in sorrow for wasted days
of love unspoken,
but by trivia such as these
the heart is broken.*

(644) “This and That” - 22 March 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Viewing Wells Cathedral from on high

I worked for while a deacon and then an assistant priest at Harare Cathedral was a large, bearded and difficult bachelor. We breakfasted together once a week on bacon, egg, mighty smoked sausages and his coarse, homemade, esophagus excoriating, wholemeal bread, setting the world and church to rights in robust conversation. With a doleful shake of his head, he was prone to say, ‘What a world we live in Andrew, what a world! It’s little more than a vast fornicatorium!’

“The Viagra program suggests that he wasn’t far wrong. So many sad old men, desperate to be and to remain sexual athletes in their dotage. They would be better advised to heed Sophocles who, four hundred years before Christ and in advanced old age, was asked how he felt about sex and replied, *I am delighted to be free from it, like a slave from a savage and tyrannical master.*

Spaghetti-like ganglions of worms

“The monthly after church BBQ last Sunday was attended by about twenty five of us, with lots of youngsters. We enjoyed a game of cricket in a paddock, David Young and Malcolm McRoberts proving to be fiendish bowlers, Kelly Reynolds a vociferous umpire, Angela Wright a batswoman of some promise and Peter Young a dozy outfielder, but well able to defend his wicket as a batsman.

“On Monday, my day off, after a lovely All Souls’ Eucharist, all candles, roses and remembrance and followed by an al fresco breakfast, we helped load Laurie Anstis’ capacious trailer with the Fete’s tents to be returned to Bandiana, I then managed a little gardening. This is always a joy though far too spasmodic a part of my weekly life to bear results as fecund as I would like. One great satisfaction this time was to break into a compost stack that has been in a state of quiet contemplation for well over a year. It was almost perfect:



Hampton Court Gardens in summer



The Chapel Royal, Hampton Court

involves shifting a huge amount of soil. This will contribute to many a compost stack to come. Now that we have a door from the dining room into the back garden, outdoor dining and lounging has become a greater part of Rectory life.

Conversing through a fly-wire door

“On Monday we celebrated Rachel’s 13th birthday by taking a trip to the top of a local, well-wooded and substantial hill with a couple of her friends, a perfect day for it. We met an echidna which, like a lapsed parishioner, appeared not much to relish an encounter with the local priest. Only last week I visited a house and was required to hold a conversation through the fly-wire door, a rare example of inhospitality in friendly Australia. Tuesday included several pastoral visits, the compilation of a monthly roster of clerical duties for Fr Ed, myself, Fr Bruce and David Mitchell, the typing up of memorial notices for the new prayer books and preparing for the first session of a high church alternative to the Alpha Course, called Credo. On Wednesday members of the Pastoral Care team transported to the 10.00am Eucharist several folk who find church difficult to attend, for a variety of reasons. Afterwards they were provided with morning tea, this to be a monthly event. Victorian mush



Viewing Wells, magnolia time

“Selecting music for both Sunday and Christmas was time consuming but fun. As my beard whitens, I grow more sentimental and find myself appreciating music of a sort that in my younger days I would have scorned as Victorian mush. It is much the same with reading. I have just finished Dickens’ ‘The Old Curiosity Shop’ and the sentimental parts, like Little Nell’s death, of which Oscar Wilde quipped ‘One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing,’ I now find moving. In my lengthy early morning chapel times I am reading ‘Varieties of Religious Experience’ written by William James in 1901, the brilliant brother of the brilliant novelist Henry James. It is full of sweet wisdom and is exquisitely written.

“I haven’t as yet been paid the fee due to me for my latest light verse effusions on the A.B.C. On Monday I sent the following little E-mail which had an immediate result, \$250, not to be sneezed at:

Not a Reminder

*I do not write my verse for money,
So please don’t think it odd or funny
That I would never contemplate
Reminding you of my long wait
For payment now long overdue*

*For verses written just for you,
My dear and lovely ABC
Who mean so very much to me.
Though should, perchance, my due turn up,
I’d spend it shamelessly all up.”*

(643) “This and That”2 - 15 March 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Wells Cathedral on a misty spring morning

My mother was a tigress, she could roar, though more with laughter than anger, so a kookaburra as much as a tigress. She was an Australian magpie, an English blackbird, a lark, she loved singing. She was a pussy cat, she purred when she saw roast almonds or a glass of wine. She was a polar bear, fiercely protective of and prepared to die for her young. She was a puppy, she loved to be tickled, though on her feet and bunions, not her tummy or behind her ears. She was a worm, a book-worm, her nose was always deep in one of a great pile of library books. She was a pig, she snorted, snuffled, guffawed and chortled at ridiculous jokes. She was an owl, wise to the wiles and ways of her children and humankind. She was a mouse, a church mouse, never willingly missing matins and evensong. She was a koala bear, she loved a long siesta, though with a block of chocolate rather than eucalyptus leaves and with her husband beside her. She was a sparrow, her legs being thin, “she had tossed with a sparrow and lost” her husband quipped. She was a dragon, puffing cigarette smoke appreciatively, not fire and brimstone. Before she died she was crippled with arthritis, almost blind

and stroke-stricken, but in essence the same woman she had always been, family oriented, a loyal Christian, a wonderful mother and a good and lovely person, worth a thousand posies on Mothering Sunday.

Mama mia

When we are dying many of us call out for our mother, we are told, no matter how ancient we are. It’s a final plea for a return to the first and most complete and all encompassing, all embracing comfort, safety and love we ever know. Let my tomb be as the womb that bore me and my end as my beginning.

‘Oh my God!’ we Anglo Saxons too easily expostulate. The Italians are more perceptive: ‘Mama mia!’ Although Jesus in the first three Gospels appears disdainful of his kinsfolk, including his mother, St John’s Gospel tells us that while dying he entrusted the care of his mother to his beloved disciple, John. As he died, not only was his mother present at the foot of the cross, she was also in and on his mind.

Racy, gossipy letters

Rudyard Kipling’s mother Alice “...was lively, witty and talented; in a Jane Austen novel she would have been called accomplished. She wrote and published poems, arranged songs, sang and sewed and knew how to run a household. Her racy, gossipy letters captured acquaintances and social situations in phrases that flickered between mischief and malice. She ‘saw things at a glance and dispatched them in a word’. Her poems showed another side, revealing a deep strain of melancholy...” She also played a part in the genesis of her son’s very first novel, “*The Light that Failed*”, which Lord Birkenhead called the “rotten apple” among Kipling’s published works, though George Orwell thought it “excellent”.

Mollifying mama

There are two versions of Kipling's first novel. The first is shorter, with twelve chapters and a happy ending. It was published in 1891 in an American periodical. The second is longer, with fifteen chapters and an unhappy ending. It was published as a hardback standard edition by Macmillan and Co. in 1892.

It was Kipling's mother Alice who pressed him for a happy ending, against his better judgement, and so for the second and longer version, with its unhappy ending, he adds a prefatory note: "*This is the story of 'The Light That Failed' as it was originally conceived by the writer.*"

However, being a dutiful and loving son he also composed a dedicatory poem for the second version, as if to mollify his mother and assuage his own guilt at betraying her wishes:

Mother o' Mine

*If I were hanged on the highest hill,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose love would follow me still,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!*

*If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose tears would come down to me,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!*

*If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!*

The Borbach Chantry

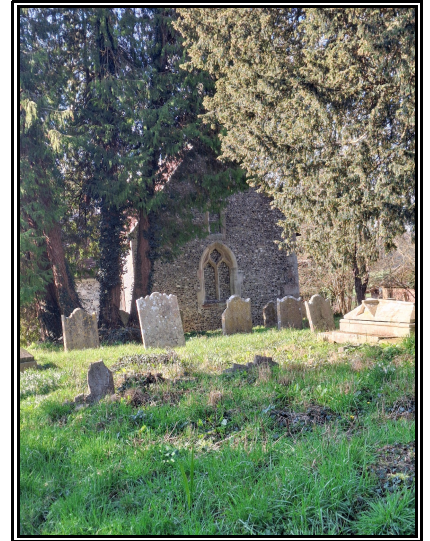
Travelling back from Southampton recently we discovered in the village of West Dean the Borbach Chantry. Built in about 1333 by Robert de Borbach in the south aisle of a 14th-century parish church, it is all that remains of the church and contains several arresting memorials. One of them is of the 17th century diarist John Evelyn's cousin, also John Evelyn, with his wife. Their eleven children, kneel below them in what is a touching memorial, well worth a visit.

Beauty Eternal

Teresa Hooley (1888-1973)

*To-day I saw a butterfly,
The first-born of the Spring,
Sunning itself upon a bank
A lovely, tawny thing.*

*I saw a dandelion, too,
As golden as the sun;
And these will still be beautiful
When all the wars are done.*



Borbach Chantry - West Dean



*John Evelyn monument
Borbach Chantry
West Dean*

(642) “This and That” - 8 March 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - *Behind the Balustrade*



Wells Cathedral, South Transept “Scissor arch”

A world without God! It’s unthinkable, unbearable. No sense, no meaning, no purpose, no point. Our unimaginably astonishing and mind-blowing universe mere serendipitous happenstance. An inexplicable, random, inadvertent, fortuitous quirk. Beauty no more significant than ugliness, being as pointless as non-being, goodness as futile as evil, sense equivalent to nonsense, love as senseless as hate. No whisper of angels’ wings, no gleams of glory, no hints of heaven, no murmurs of mystery, no tantalising tremors of transcendence.

Difficult it might be to believe, but not to believe is unthinkable.

The whisper of angels’ wings

At the heart of faith lie beauty, mystery, the Divine, the glorious, the lovely, the ineffable. It is this that the best of our poets and artists have seen and see, have heard and hear. There is more than meets the eye to reality, a shining otherness to the commonplace, the whisper of angels’ wings, gleams of glory, hints of heaven, murmurs of mystery, tantalising tremors of transcendence. The seventeenth century poet Henry Vaughan felt

*.....through all his fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness,*

and William Blake advises us

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

It is why the accounts of Jesus’ “Transfiguration” resonate so strongly. On a mountain, three of his disciples, like poets and artists, momentarily see beyond and through the ordinary appearance of things to a reality beyond reality, to reality transfigured, a shining, otherness to what is: the whisper of angels’ wings, gleams of glory, hints of heaven, murmurs of mystery, tantalising tremors of transcendence.

They see Jesus, the ordinary man they’ve come to know so well as they tramp together the dusty byways of Palestine, with scales dropped from their eyes. Ordinary reality transfigured, seen for what it is, a medium for spiritual reality, the Divine.

The gate of heaven

All reality is open to transfiguration.

Jacob at his desert camping ground, after a dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder says: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.” Anywhere, anything and anyone can be revelatory. Most completely and mind- blowingly in Jesus of



Wells Cathedral, from the south

Nazareth. Anywhere or anything, everywhere or everything, when seen from faith's perspective is shot through with glory. The supernatural is to be perceived and apprehended by way of the natural. The extraordinary by way of the ordinary. Ivan Turgenev's Prose Poem "*Christ*" tells us this memorably:

I saw myself in a dream, a youth, almost a boy, in a low pitched wooden church. The slim wax candles gleamed, spots of red, before the old pictures of the saints. A ring of coloured light encircled each tiny flame. Dark and dim it was in the church....But there stood before me many people. All fair-haired peasant heads. From time to time they began swaying, falling, rising again, like the ripe ears of wheat when the wind of summer passes in slow undulation over them.

All at once some man came up from behind and stood beside me. I did not turn towards him; but at once I felt that this man was Christ. Emotion, curiosity, awe, overmastered me suddenly. I made an effort and looked at my neighbour. A face like everyone's, a face like all

men's faces. The eyes looked a little upwards, quietly and intently. The lips closed, but not compressed; the upper lip, as it were, resting on the lower. A small beard parted in two. The hands folded and still. And the clothes on him like everyone's. What sort of man is this? I thought. Such an ordinary, ordinary man! It can't be! I turned away. But I had hardly turned my eyes away from this ordinary man

When I felt again that it really was none other than Christ standing by me. Again I made an effort over myself....And again the same face, like all men's faces, the same everyday though unknown features. And suddenly my heart sank, and I came to myself. Only then I realised that just such a face - a face like all men's faces - is the face of Christ.

Tantalising tremors of transcendence

That is the story of the Transfiguration backwards. Looking for the transfigured Christ, he saw the ordinary man and upon reflection realised that they can be one and the same. So too the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The ordinary transfigured, perceived for what Jesus, his words, his death and his resurrection made and make it. The ordinary, extraordinary. "A face like all men's faces - is the face of Christ." The world as sacrament.

Earth crammed with heaven

There is a shining, otherness to everyday reality and truth, a faint whisper of angels' wings, gleams of glory, hints of heaven, murmurs of mystery, tantalising tremors of transcendence. As Elizabeth Barret Browning puts it:

*Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
Though only those who see take off their shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*



St Winfrith's Church, East Dean



St Winfrith's Church, East Dean, interior

(641) “This and That” - 1 March 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Gorse, Port Stanley, the Falkland Islands

God created us ‘in his own image’, the first book of the Bible tell us. We have been returning the compliment ever since, as Voltaire was the first to point out.

Juggling Jerry

God is a divine juggler in an enjoyable verse monologue called “Juggling Jerry” by the Victorian poet and novelist George Meredith. It is a pity that the poem’s thirteen stanzas are too long to reproduce in full. They tell of a dying juggler on gorse-blooming

heathland addressing his wife on his approaching end with acceptance, perceptive wisdom and good

humour. Here is the first verse:

*Pitch here the tent, while the old horse grazes:
By the old hedge-side we’ll halt a stage.
It’s nigh my last above the daisies:
My next leaf’ll be man’s blank page.
Yes, my old girl! and it’s no use crying:
Juggler, constable, king, must bow.
One that out juggles all’s been spying
Long to have me, and he has me now.*

The penultimate verse begins:

*Yonder came smells of the gorse, so nutty,
Gold-like and warm: it’s the prime of May.
Better than mortar, brick and putty
Is God’s house on a blowing day*

Gorse in the Falkland Islands

It was on the Falkland Islands that Diana and I first became aware of the gold-like beauty and nutty scent of sun-warmed gorse. Though actually and more specifically the scent of gorse blossom is more intriguingly coco-nutty than nutty.

In 2015 we visited the Falklands for three weeks, living in Port Stanley Deanery, assisting at the Cathedral and exploring the islands. Our daily walk took us along a path that follows the shoreline of Port Stanley Harbour’s sheltered sound and at one point between great bushes of gorse. At that time they were in heavy, golden blossom so redolent with the scent of coconut we were all but intoxicated.

In the khaki coloured Falkland landscape the only significant splashes of colour are provided by gorse. Near some of the settlements great thorny hedges of the shrub provide a brightly golden and welcome



Gorse hedge, Fitzroy, the Falkland Islands

contrast to the awe inspiring, windswept starkness of the general landscape. Gorse was introduced to the Falklands in the first half of the 19th century to provide hedging for the containment of livestock



Flying to St Helena

and for shelter from the all pervasive wind. In the 1982 Falklands War gorse hedges played a significant role in the battle for Goose Green.

Because gorse flowers are edible, coco-nuttily fragrant and golden bright they delight both eyes and tastebuds when added to a salad. As with elder flowers, gorse blossom steeped in vodka makes an exotic and interesting drink.

The world's most useless airport

We are thinking of returning to the island of St Helena for a brief visit this year, much easier to do than in the past, now that there's an airport. The elder of my two daughters was born on the island, but we left when she was only one year old. She would like to visit her birthplace while we are still around to show her around and we are happy to oblige. It can still be a little tricky to get there though. The £285,000,000 UK funded airport was opened, after much hesitation and many delays, in 2017. It was intended to open one of the world's most isolated inhabited islands to the rest of the world, but hard to predict winds make landings difficult, so much so that for a time it was labelled the "world's most useless airport". Planes leave from Johannesburg, but have to stop to take on fuel at Walvis Bay to ensure there's enough fuel to return to Johannesburg, should landing on the island be impossible.

Happy funereal reminiscences and prospects

Talking about this proposed trip on the way back from our early morning, Lady Chapel Eucharist last week, Diana and I recalled the colourful funerals we had experienced on St Helena Island, forty or so years ago. At that time and in the tropics with no refrigeration facilities available to the island's ancient undertaker, a thirty six hour time limit was imposed between death and burial. An ancient, sombrely black hearse, brightly decked with wreaths of garish zinnias, zig zagged its way up Ladder Hill to the small Cathedral of which I was vicar, 1,700 feet above sea level. After an invariably well attended church service, the coffin was carried out to a newly dug grave and its waiting gravedigger, a fine and most amiable fellow called Ivan. He prided himself on the frenzied speed with which he refilled the grave as the mourners sang *Abide with me* or *The day though gavest Lord is ended*. On one memorable occasion he cramped and collapsed into a half-filled grave in agony. To his chagrin several able bodied mourners completed the task for him.

These happy, funereal reminiscences were prompted by a flippant question posed by myself, a wily octogenarian, as how best to plan for the remotely possible, though unlikely, demise of my good self while revisiting the remote island.

Our not altogether fanciful answer to the question was for Diana, before we depart for the island, to harvest a generous tuft of two of what remains of my hair and several months' worth of nail parings for careful storage. These, in the event of my death, to be divided in two. One half to be sent to Australia and deposited next to my first wife Margaret's remains in the gardens of St Augustine's Church, Shepparton, the other to be buried, enshrined, cherished or disposed of as Diana thinks most appropriate. Whereupon an Island burial, as the trade winds blow, would be fine.



St Paul's Cathedral, St Helena

(640) “This and That” - 22 February 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Rhossili Bay Beach, the Gower peninsula, Wales

Timothy Winters must be one of the best known of English schoolboys. In my own pantheon of child heroes, he's up there with Nigel Molesworth, the “goriller of 3B”, and “curse of st custard's,” “chiz chiz,” “hem hem”.

Nigel Molesworth is the inspired creation of Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle. Timothy Winters is the eponymous subject of a Charles Causley poem that is widely featured in school anthologies. Causley was a schoolteacher for many years and assures us that Timothy Winters was a real boy: “I was thunder stuck when people thought I'd made it up! He was a real bloke. Poor little devil.”

Timothy Winters

*Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football pool,
Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.*

*His belly is white, his neck is dark,
And his hair is an exclamation mark.
His clothes are enough to scare a crow
And through his britches the blue winds blow.*

*When teacher talks he won't hear a word
And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,
He licks the patterns off his plate
And he's not even heard of the Welfare State.*

*Timothy Winters has bloody feet
And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
And they say there aren't boys like him any more.*

*Old man Winters likes his beer
And his missus ran off with a bombardier.
Grandma sits in the grate with a gin
And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.*

*The Welfare Worker lies awake
But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,
So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
And slowly goes on growing up.*

*At Morning Prayers the Master helms
For children less fortunate than ourselves,
And the loudest response in the room is when
Timothy Winters roars “Amen!”*

*So come one angel, come on ten:
Timothy Winters says “Amen
Amen amen amen amen.”
Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen!*

Tricky as a ten foot snake

With ears like bombs and teeth like splinters, a blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters. Unwashed, unkempt, his belly is white, his neck is dark, and his hair is an exclamation mark. Inadequately clothed and a teacher's nightmare, his clothes are enough to scare a crow, and through his britches the blue winds blow. When teacher talks he won't hear a word and he shoots down dead the arithmetic bird. With no social graces or table manners and untouched by the Welfare System, he licks the patterns off his plate and he's not even heard of the Welfare State. Chilblained, with badly shod feet, he has no bed to sleep in and complacent middle-class folk think such deprivation no longer exists: Timothy Winters has bloody feet and he lives in a house on Suez Street, he sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor and they say there aren't boys like him anymore. He has been deserted by his mother and his father and grandmother are drunks, Old Man Winters likes his beer



St Madoc, Llanmado, the Gower peninsula, Wales

and his missus ran off with a bombardier, grandma sits in the grate with a gin, and Timothy's dosed with an aspirin. Beyond the reach of welfare workers he accepts his lot without complaint, the Welfare Worker lies awake, but the Law's as tricky as a ten foot snake, so Timothy Winter's drinks his cup and slowly goes on growing up.

Roaring "Amen"

Yet in spite of all that, when the headmaster at school assembly prays for those less fortunate than ourselves, who is it that shouts out the most unqualified "AMEN"? It is Timothy Winters, the direst of victims. *At Morning Prayers the Master helves for children less fortunate than ourselves, and the loudest response in the room is when Timothy Winters roars 'Amen!'*

There is little left to be said when a victim, instead of bleating, bleeds for others. We can only let our hearts go out to him, admire him, love him and shout "AMEN" with him: *So come one angel, come on ten, Timothy Winters says 'AMEN, AMEN AMEN AMEN AMEN'. Timothy Winters Lord, Amen.*

The man from Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth was a victim who accepted his victimisation and his cross, at least in part, by seeing the victimisation of others more readily than his own and living for others rather than for himself. There is little left to be said when a victim, instead of bleating, bleeds for others. We can only let our hearts go out to him, admire him, love him and shout "AMEN" with him:

*So come one angel, come on ten,
Jesus of Nazareth says 'Amen
Amen Amen Amen Amen'
Jesus of Nazareth Lord, Amen.*

Better things are promised

The garage where we take our car Hilary for its MOT and to be serviced, is the furthest of all necessary destinations we are ever required to make here in Wells. It is a 25 minute walk from our house. We set out to collect her from the garage in a prolonged shower of rain recently and arrived well sodden, cold, but exhilarated. The average annual rainfall for Wells is 32 inches and the total we recorded in our garden for last year was 33 inches, so 2025 was a fairly average year for rain, in spite



The Fleur de Lys Pub, Pilly, St John's Boldre Parish



St Andrew's Penrice, the Gower peninsula, Wales

of a very dry and sunny summer. The wettest month in these parts is said to be November (6.5 inches last year) and the driest April (1.01 inches last year).

So far this year we have recorded 11.46 inches up until last Friday, the 20th of February. Last year on this date we had recorded 6.69 inches. So all is sodden, but camelias, snowdrops, daffodils and primroses are putting on a plucky face and the birds are well into dawn chorus rehearsals. Better things are coming.

(639) “This and That” - 15 February 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

In 1957 the pop singer Pat Boone released an EP called “Four by Pat.” The lyrics of one its four songs, “Technique”, were so misogynistic they would turn the face of our new Archbishop of Canterbury as purple as her shirt.

The bachelor technique

Even Boone, in hindsight, dissociated himself from the song’s words, though they were obviously sung humorously and tongue in cheek. Still alive at 91, he’s as right wing as a bible belt American protestant can be. A few of the song’s lines go:

*You love ’em, you leave ’em
That’s what is known as technique
The more you deceive ’em
The more they like your technique*

*Ooohhh, de women folk
They back is broad, they brain is weak
Sooo, they pigeon for the bachelor technique.
(and so on and so on and worse....)*

It is the first pop song I can still remember. In 1957 my brother and I were pupils of a Southern Rhodesia, bush boarding school called Diggelfold. It seems that at the age of eleven I would have been roaming the African bush, my pallid, pommie legs protruding from khaki shorts, extolling in a piping, treble voice, questionable techniques to do with courtship and love. Pop music wasn’t heard in our

mission station home, nor did we own a gramophone, but Pat Boone’s “Technique”, listened to at school, began a love affair with popular music that lasted into my late teens when it began slowly to be replaced by a far deeper love of classical music.

Illicit bliss in a Jaguar

For the first two and a half years of secondary schooling I was a boarder at a “home for missionaries children” in Harare. My fellow boarders came from all over Africa, many of them American bible freaks, more notable for pretended piety than the real thing. My older sister had paved the way there, but then left, with relief, to study nursery nursing. My younger brother joined

me after a year. While there my voice broke and I began to fall in love with girls, but alas without any technique whatsoever, questionable or otherwise. Undeclared and unrequited love was my lot.

The pious lady who ran the place drove a smart jaguar car with its very own radio. On favourable nights, after ‘lights out’, a few of us would unscrew the burglar bars on our bedroom windows to sneak out and into her Jaguar to listen to Radio Lourenco Marques on its radio. We lolled there in illicit bliss, sucking dodgy sweets and smoking cigarettes at thruppence for 10, entranced by Connie Francis, Marty Robins, Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers and more. Our glowing cigarette ends betrayed us in the end. We were caught and not long thereafter my parents were advised that my brother and I would be better off elsewhere. Happily, we were sent to Guinea Fowl Boys High, like Diggelfold set in the bush rather than a town.



The entrance to Diggelfold School in 2010



The home for missionaries' children in 2010

Miss Muriel Hook

At some stage during those years our mission station home was visited by an elderly missionary lady called Miss Muriel Hook, may she rest in peace. She was the doughtiest of dames, disdainful of make up and far from lissome. She possessed the characteristic thick ankles of missionary ladies and wore tweedy skirts and no nonsense shoes. The twinkle in her eyes, behind the thick pebble lenses of cheap, round spectacles, indicated a kindly sanctity, authenticated by humour.

For the duration of her “long leave” in England, she lent to my parents an excellent little gramophone and a selection of records, among them Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, Beethoven’s *Sixth Symphony* and Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik* and *Horn Concertos*. I was overwhelmed by a beauty of which, until then, I had been all but unaware. Gradually this rather different sort of melodious beauty displaced all others and once I left school my father and I began to build up a fine record collection of 17th and 18th century composers.



The Quire, Wells Cathedral

the major reasons for retiring to a cathedral city where daily Choral Evensong perfectly sung, in a peerlessly beautiful space, melds actual worship with the worshipfulness of melody and beauty. Residency in Wells is to have arrived in heaven without bothering to die

The repertoire

The only slight drawback has to do with repertoire. Much 20th and 21st century liturgical music appears curiously unmelodic. It can be outré, flashy, arresting, quirky, dissonant, atonal, cacophonous, clever-clever and even interesting, all of which makes it, I am sure, great fun and challenging to sing, but rarely is it melodic, in any traditional sense. Much of it leaves worship-hungry souls like mine untouched, for we go to church not to be dazzled, or to applaud, but to worship, aided by our superb choir and brilliant musical director and team.



A dormitory - Guinea Fowl Boys High School - 2010

So, what of that repertoire? Well, I have begun to compile a data base of the Cathedral Choir's programmed music, with the dates of its composers. Of the last 64 Choral Evensongs, 128 choir items were 20th and 21st century, 33 were 19th century, 1 was 18th century, 5 were 17th century, and 37 were 16th century and before. Please, please, let us have more from the 17th and 18th centuries. Then, then, I promise, I promise to set about broadening my musical horizons and tastes.

(638) “This and That” - 8 February 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Cockatoo feather, boomerang and Christ Church Skipton (Australia), with flowering clivia

In 1637 a young man called Edward King, a fellow of Christ’s College Cambridge and close friend of the poet John Milton, was shipwrecked and drowned off the coast of Wales. We owe one of Milton’s most famous poems to the tragedy, *Lycidas*, dedicated to his memory. It is a longish piece of 193 lines and I can still recall reading it for the first time with great pleasure. There was rather less appreciation for the 10,000 lines of the poet’s *Paradise Lost*.

Fame is the spur

Lycidas has been called “the most perfect piece of pure literature in existence”, asserts the Milton scholar, James Holly Hanford, but not every notable litterateur agrees. The perceptive, eighteenth century poet, playwright, essayist, literary critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson disliked the poem for being artificial and contrived. He writes: “Surely no man could have fancied that he read *Lycidas* with pleasure, had he not known its author”. Well I didn’t, but did. The lines from the poem:

*‘Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise...
To scorn delights, and live laborious days;’*

gave Howard Spring the title of his famous novel ‘*Fame is the Spur*’. It’s about the rise of the socialist labour movement in Britain from the mid-19th century to the 1930s. It was written in 1940 and I read that too appreciatively as a young man.

Most of us fancy a little fame, even if it’s only local. The closest I came to it was as a gung ho Editor of the Diocesan “Ballarat Chronicle”. In retrospect it did me little good, fattening up and swelling my ego. I was eventually and justifiably sacked, to my great good. The poet James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) is perceptive on fame:

In An Album

*The misspelt scrawl, upon the wall
By some Pompeian idler traced,
In ashes packed (ironic fact!)
Lies eighteen centuries uneffaced,
While many a page of bard and sage,
Deemed once mankind’s immortal gain,
Lost from Time’s ark, leaves no more mark
Than a keel’s furrow through the main.*

*O Chance and Change! our buzz’s range
Is scarcely wider than a fly’s;
Then let us play at fame to-day,
To-morrow be unknown and wise;*

*And while the fair beg locks of hair,
And autographs, and Lord knows what,
Quick! let us scratch our moment’s match,
Make our brief blaze, and be forgot!*

*Too pressed to wait, upon her slate
Fame writes a name or two in doubt;
Scarce written, these no longer please,
And her own finger rubs them out:
It may ensue, fair girl, that you
Years hence this yellowing leaf may see,
And put to task, your memory ask
In vain, ‘This Lowell, who was he?’*

Jesus and Maimonides agree

Jesus of Nazareth and Maimonides, the 12th Century Jewish rabbi/philosopher, appear to agree that giving anonymously, rather than publicly, is a superior form of charity. “*When thou doest alms,*” says St Matthew’s Jesus, “*let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth,*” and Maimonides places

anonymous charity at rung number 7 on his “8-rung ladder of charitable giving.” At the very highest level, on rung number 8, is charity that makes long term self-sufficiency possible for a recipient. For example, it is good to give fish, but better still a fishing rod.



Holy Cross, Middlezoy, the Somerset Levels

In the second part of a long, not highly regarded poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, the poet James Russell Lowell has Jesus appear to disagree with both Maimonides and his Gospel self in a way that has possible Eucharistic significance:

*The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give, but what we share, —
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three, —
Himself, his hungering neighbour, and me.*

The ubiquity of dogs

Dogs appear to be welcome in more and more places. Supermarkets are still forbidden, but almost everywhere else is now open territory to them. Few churches forbid them entry and in many they accompany their owner to the altar rail to receive a blessing, if not, as yet, the consecrated Host.

The early Italian renaissance poet and scholar Francis Petrarch 1304 – 1374 has left us an epitaph for his dog Zabot which, when translated wittily by Fred Chappell, is charming:

For the Tomb of the Little Dog Zabot

*Your house was small, your body but a puplet;
A shoebox was your grave, your epitaph this couplet.*

The English poet Sir William Watson, 1858-1935, also wrote an affectionate epitaph for a beloved pet dog:

*His friends he loved. His direst earthly foes -
Cats - I believe he did but feign to hate.
My hands will miss the insinuated nose,
Mine eyes the tail that wagged contempt at Fate*

So as not to neglect humanity, however, here is a sentimental gem of popular theology, an epitaph for a beloved mother:

*The trumpets sounded, St Peter said come.
The Pearly Gates swung open and in walked Mum.*



Holy Cross, Middlezoy, interior



*The Somerset Levels
February the 1st
2026*

(637) “This and That” - 1 February 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Male Bullfinch © Francis C. Franklin / CC-BY-SA-3.0

The surname Bullfinch (sometimes Bulfinch) is not common. Its position in the surnames found at the popular European genealogy platform *Geneat* is only 64,612th. I am pleased that the surname Neaum is even more exclusive, a lowly 192,746th.

Brain size and monogamy

I like the name Bullfinch. Were I not a Neaum I would happily be one, they are such plucky little birds and the males so, so beautiful. What is more, their brains are larger than most birds of their size and they are strictly monogamous, two attributes that appear to go together, because monogamy requires a great deal of cognitive effort in watching, anticipating and empathising with a mate.

Gentlemen, this is no humbug

The campus of the Massachusetts General Hospital, in the United States, is host to the “Bulfinch Building”, an officially designated “National Historic Landmark”. It was designed by an architect called Charles Bulfinch and built between 1818 and 1823, with major expansions added between 1844 and 1846. Under the dome, in the “Bulfinch Auditorium” on October 16 1846, a dentist called William Morton, successfully and for the very first time, demonstrated the use of diethyl ether, using an inhaler he had designed himself, to induce general anaesthesia for a patient undergoing removal of a neck tumour. At the conclusion of what was not a lengthy procedure it was affirmed to the audience, “Gentlemen, this is no humbug!” The auditorium is now known as the “Ether Dome” and October 16 is “Ether Day”,

Several anaesthetists have introduced themselves to me in a professional capacity recently. My effective ice-breaker goes: “Ah, my anaesthetist? Wonderful, we are in much the same business. You, intentionally, put individuals to sleep with drugs. I, unintentionally, put congregations to sleep with logorrhoea.”



Bulfinch Building, Massachusetts General Hospital

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England’s Nazareth

I came across an old postcard from my youngest daughter Rachel last week. Having just taken on a job with the Oxford University Press she was living in Oxford at the time, but had recently completed three months at St George’s College in Jerusalem. A member of St Mary Magdalene’s Church in the city, she had been on a pilgrimage to Walsingham (known as “England’s Nazareth”) with its Rector and a group of parishioners. The card goes:

Had a great time at Walsingham - if OUP doesn’t work out I’m thinking of a career as an anchoress. The pay isn’t great but the promotions are amazing. England’s Nazareth is vastly more beautiful than the original, which is heaving and full of construction and rubbish - just where Christ would show up, the cheeky tyke! Much love, Ray.



The Shrine of Our Lady, Walsingham
 Photo: Linda Lagoe

Rowan and Lulu

Some years ago, when Rowan Williams was still the Archbishop of Canterbury, Alan Renton, a thoughtful, convinced atheist wrote *“My daughter came home from primary school a few weeks ago and sat down to write a letter to God. It read ‘To God how did you get invented? From Lulu xo.’ When she asked us to send it (by setting light to it and putting it up the chimney, as we do with letters to Father Christmas) several courses of action offered themselves.....”*

After much thought and consideration he decided to email her letter to the Scottish Episcopal Church (no reply), the Presbyterians (ditto) and the Scottish Catholics (a pleasing but too theologically sophisticated answer). However, for good measure, he also sent it to *“the head of theology of the Anglican Communion, based at Lambeth Palace”*. This was the response:

“Dear Lulu,
 Your dad has sent on your letter and asked if I have any answers. It’s a difficult one! But I think God might reply a bit like this:

Dear Lulu,

Nobody invented me - but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from.

They discovered me when they were very, very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn’t expected. Then they invented ideas about me - some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible.

From time to time I sent them some hints - specially in the life of Jesus - to help them get closer to what I’m really like.

But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions!

And then he’d send you lots of love and sign off. I know he doesn’t usually write letters, so I have to do the best I can on his behalf. Lots of love from me too.

+ Archbishop Rowan”

Machiavellian wisdom

When Machiavelli was on his death bed, he is said to have been visited by the Pope, who said to him, “Machiavelli, will you now renounce the devil and all his works?” Machiavelli barely opened an eye. So the Pope repeated, “Machiavelli, will you now renounce the devil and all his works?” Whereupon Machiavelli opened his eyes and looking up at the pope said, “this is no time to make enemies.”

Shrine of Or Lady: Walsingham

(Copyright ©: Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk)



(636) “This and That” - 25 January 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade



Tristan da Cunha, volcanic sand beach

Melchizedek is an arresting name, an exotically biblical moniker, one that either of my two sons might well have preferred to mere Peter and David.

The original Melchizedek is mentioned twice only in the Old Testament and once in the New. In the Book of Genesis he is the “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High”. He mysteriously brings bread and wine to Abram and blesses him.

The Art of Swimming and Podcasts

A different and Frenchified Melchizedek has been on my mind recently, Melchisédech Thévenot (1620-92). He was an accomplished and wealthy polymath who spoke English, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish and several other oriental languages. He was an author, scientist, traveller, cartographer, orientalist, inventor, and diplomat, whose enjoyment of swimming persuaded him to write what is possibly the very first book ever written on the subject, “The Art of Swimming”. It was posthumously published in 1696 and much appreciated and widely read during the 18th century, it also helped popularise the breaststroke. In 1990 he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame on the strength of it.

My own interest in Thévenot arises from being required last week, for a second time, to lie on my back for three days, a back-aching, tedious business when reading books and screens is all but impossible. Drifting in and out of sleep I’ve listened to hours and hours of podcasts, and am grateful to Melvyn Bragg for “In Our Time” and to Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook for “The Rest is History”.

A bubble of gas

It was a few days before Christmas, and at short notice, that a portion of donor cornea was expertly and precisely grafted into my own left eye in Southampton Hospital. In spite of me lying supine for several days afterwards, it failed fully to attach to my own cornea. Last Friday, to remedy this, a relatively brief corrective surgical procedure replaced the now dissipated bubble of gas behind the cornea. This bubble holds the donor tissue against the remaining cornea’s tissue to encourage full attachment and eventual oneness. The bubble finds its way to the right position to do this only if the patient lies supine for two or three days.

A bored, backlaid and laidback imagination grow febrile. Mine decided that the bubble in my eye must be similar in appearance and movement to the bubble in a spirit level. It was Melchisédech Thévenot who invented the spirit level in the 1960s.

The liquid he used in his invention was coloured alcohol, more suitable than water because of its low viscosity and surface tension which allows the bubble to travel the tube quickly, with minimal interference from the surface of the glass tube and to settle accurately. Moreover alcohol, with its low freezing point, unlike water, doesn’t break a glass tube in freezing weather due to ice expansion.

Dog-paddling in the South Atlantic

I had to learn to swim without the benefit of Melchisédech Thévenot’s “The Art of Swimming”. At about the age of eight or nine, when living on the island of Tristan da Cunha, I taught myself. In the island’s tiny, wooden bungalow of a vicarage, we were lullabied each night by the sea’s “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” or kept awake by the crashing and roaring of its storm driven waves. The little dwelling looked out over the great South



Swimmers, Tristan da Cunha, 1953. I’m 2nd from left



Tristan da Cunha rock pools visited in 2012

Atlantic to a distant horizon, but in the foreground onto a gully of well grazed turf that offered ready access to a black volcanic sand beach, about a hundred feet below the settlement plateau.

On that beach the tide, as it receded, exposed seaweed fringed rock pools of pristine South Atlantic water, home to red-whiskered, baby crayfish, octopuses, assorted molluscs and a variety of small, darting fish. It was in these pools that I first learned to put my head under water and with a push project and then propel myself, without touching the bottom, from one side of a pool to the other. After a while it occurred to me that I was swimming.

I have loved water ever since, though because not taught to swim by the likes of Melchisédech Thévenot, stylistically I'm a hopeless uncoordinated, thresher and swiper of the water, a bald-headed, dog-paddling, doltish dill of a swimmer.

Born again

When learning to swim in the sea, one of the great revelations occurs when first you dare to open your eyes under water. Then you are born again, are in another world and element, buoyant, able to fly in a seemingly silent universe, where colours are strangely luminous, rich and crystal clear. The landscape is intriguingly different, not worn and moulded by rain and wind, but by sweeping currents and pounding waves near the surface and deeper down, still and hardly worn or moulded at all. It is a mysterious, wondrous world, profuse of life and growth and beauty.



The Vicarage on Tristan da Cunha in 1953.

To be baptised is, ideally, just such a dive into a new and magical world. Out of the everyday one of bully boys, power, status, celebrity, egotism, relentless competition and greed into the loving and forgiving community that local parish church communities, at very least, aspire to be. A community where authority is crowned with love's thorns and where power manifests itself in service and love. A community that strives, fails, but goes on striving, to be the sort where sacrificial love, forgiveness, mercy, acceptance, honesty, generosity and understanding rule.

August 1968

W.H. Auden's response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia

The Ogre does what ogres can,
Deeds quite impossible for Man,
But one prize is beyond his reach:
The Ogre cannot master speech.

About a subjugated plain,
Among its desperate and slain,
The Ogre stalks with hands on hips,
While drivels gushes from his lips.



*Approaching
Tristan da Cunha in 2012*

(635) “This and That” - 18 January 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

In funk rather than courage, the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church of England let us all down in March 2020. They sent to all clergy a letter that began: *Our church buildings must now be closed not only for public worship, but for private prayer as well and this includes the priest or lay person offering prayer in church on their own. A notice explaining this should be put on the church door (please find template attached). We must take a lead in showing our communities how we must behave in order to slow down the spread of the Corona virus.....*



St John the Baptist, Boldre, Hampshire

In funk rather than courage nearly all of us complied, though not always quite completely. In the emailed pewsheet that followed that letter I directed attention to a poem by Alice Meynell, dredged from the depths of my memory, as a reminder to us all that this was not the first time that Jesus has been denied the tenancy of a Sunday altar and that he remains about us and with us, even if unregarded, unconsecrated, unbidden:

In Portugal, 1912

.....In field, in village, and in town
He hides an unregarded head;

Waits in the corn-lands far and near,
Bright in His sun, dark in His frost,
Sweet in the vine, ripe in the ear—
Lonely unconsecrated Host.

In ambush at the merry board
The Victim lurks unsacrificed;
The mill conceals the harvest's Lord,
The wine-press holds the unbidden Christ.

Nor did we entirely and completely desert our two churches, St John's and St Nicholas'. Diana, her sister Janet (our guest during the pandemic) and I, entered our churches to hold every single, scheduled Sunday and weekday service throughout the ban, albeit with only us present. Moreover, at St John's we concluded each service by pealing the Ellacombe-rigged bells with all the gusto we could muster.



St Nicholas', Pilley, Hampshire

Picnicking

There are about 16,000 C.of E. churches in England, organised into roughly 12,500 parishes or benefices. About 10,000 are rural and nearly all beautiful. They make ideal refreshment breaks on long journeys, with parking almost always readily available and benches in lovely churchyards for picnicking outside on warm and sunny days, with a yew tree or bramble thicket available for a discreet Jimmy Riddle. Inside are pews for picnicking in bad weather and a temptation,

even to those of little or no faith, to say a prayer. I treasure a comment made by one of our non church service attending neighbours at Boldre, affronted by a locked church because, as she put it, “I can no longer sit there quietly and talk to the God I don't believe in”.

As is so often the case, the poet R S Thomas gets it right:

The Belfry

I have seen it standing up grey, Gaunt, as though no sunlight Could ever thaw out the music Of its great bell; terrible In its own way, for religion Is like that. There are times When a black frost is upon One's whole being, and the heart In its bone belfry hangs and is dumb.	But who is to know? Always, Even in winter in the cold Of a stone church, on his knees Someone is praying, whose prayers fall Steadily through the hard spell Of weather that is between God And himself. Perhaps they are warm rain That brings the sun and afterwards flowers On the raw graves and throbbing of bells.
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That ancient profession

Wells is a cultured city and in days gone by, four of its notable elderly gentlemen made it a practice to walk beside the Bishop's Palace moat and then along the path to Dulcote on long summer evenings, chatting of art, literature and music.

They were a long retired Leader of the Wells City Band, a long retired Librarian of the Union Street City Library, a long retired City Baker and a very old and revered University of Bristol, retired Professor of English.

They enjoyed these excursions and were so engaged one summer evening when they came across four young ladies of obvious 'easy virtue' sitting on the grotesquely uncomfortable and ugly concrete bench that blights the path from Wells to Dulcote. The four ladies wished the old gentlemen, "Good Evening" and wondered if they might be of service. Graciously the old gentlemen declined the offer and continued their walk in deep thought. After a while one of them said: "Do you know, I've never seen four of those together before, I've noticed them singly, of course, but one wonders what the collective noun for such a body would be."

The retired City Baker thought that the collective noun would be a JAM of tarts. The retired Leader of the City Band inclined towards a FLOURISH of strumpets. After much thought the retired City Librarian said that they would surely be a VOLUME of Trollopes. The old Professor of English, however, walked on ahead shaking his white mane, "You are all quite wrong, quite wrong. They are neither a Jam, nor a Flourish nor a Volume".

"What then, Professor"?

"The collective noun would have to be an ANTHOLOGY".

"An anthology, Professor"?

"Yes indeed. An Anthology of English Prose".



The ugly bench on the path to Dulcote

*St John's Boldre
on a misty winter evening*



(634) “This and That” - 11 January 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

Twenty or thirty years ago scientists discovered a genetic basis for the ear wax of some folk being oily and of others dry and flaky. I wonder how important to the future of humanity that discovery has proved to be?

Well, if nothing else it can be used to remind us of the debates of medieval theologians, so often reviled by scientifically minded sophisticates, as to how many angels can dance on the point of a pin. Did they really debate such trivialities?

Good brainpower put to nonsensical ends

A website, “The Straight Dope” (now discontinued), tells us that they came very close to doing so, as the following edited extract from the site explains:

Isaac D’Israeli (1766-1848), the father of British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli...was an amateur scholar who published several books of historical and literary “curiosities” which were quite popular in their day...[He] lampooned the Scholastic philosophers of the late Middle Ages, notably Thomas Aquinas, who were famous for debating metaphysical fine points.

Aquinas wrote several ponderous philosophical tomes, the most famous of which was called ‘Summa Theologica’. It contained, among other things, several dozen propositions on the nature of angels, which Thomas attempted to work out by process of pure reason. The results were pretty tortured, and to the hipper-than-thou know-it-all of the Enlightenment... they seemed a classic example of good brainpower put to nonsensical ends.....”

“For example”, D’Israeli wrote, “Aquinas could gravely debate, whether Christ was not an hermaphrodite [and] whether there are excrements in Paradise” He might also have mentioned such Thomistic puzzlers as whether the hair and nails will grow following the Resurrection. He [did inquire] whether several angels could be in the same place at once, which of course is the dancing-on-a-pin question less comically stated...Yes, medieval theologians did get in to some pretty weird arguments, if not quite as weird as later wise guys painted them.

Nor much weirder than studying the genetic make up of ear wax.

Angels on cricket stumps

All of which brings to mind my time as a young teacher in Rhodesia where schools were fanatical about sport. I was as disdainful of sport in those days as I am now, but was required to coach and oversee a rugby team in winter and a cricket team in summer. Every Saturday of the summer term was spent umpiring my cricket team, either at home or away. Strangely I enjoyed this, not least because my team never lost a match, no thanks to any of my skills as a coach, but just possibly because of my relaxed and cavalier approach to the game.



St John the Baptist, Tisbury, Wiltshire



St Mary's Nether Stowey, Somerset

At the school I was friendly with an eccentric and talented teacher of French who, like me, was no sportsman. During the lunch break on one sunny Saturday, all the coach/umpires of our school and a visiting school were seated together eating sandwiches while one of the visitors, a cricket fanatic, was waxing long and lyrical about googlies, off breaks, on breaks, leg breaks and the finer points of his team's performance. When at last he paused for breath, my French teacher colleague rippled the sudden and blessed silence with a serious question: "Tell me," he gravely said, "how many angels, do you think, can dance on the end of a cricket stump?" There was a stunned silence and then each and every visitor ostentatiously turned their back to him in disgust for being so foul a blasphemer against the God cricket.

In Australia, when Ashes test matches were being played, nearly all the Australian Broadcasting Corporation programmes gave way to them. Even, God forbid, religious ones, thwarting even my own 'Vicar of Verse' 'masterpieces':

All the World's a Cricket Pitch

Andrew Neaum

When cricket tests are being played
Thoughtful listeners are dismayed
To find their much loved ABC
Displacing God with commentary
On each and every stroke and ball,
Each near miss and wicket fall.

It shouldn't so dismay us though,
For God in cricket too can show
Truths that lead to quiet reflection,
Fruitful thought and meditation.
Cricket needn't be at all
A vulgar, xenophobic call
To one-eyed patriotic pride
In victory of one's country's side.

A very small example may
Illustrate this: Let us say
The cricket ground is planet earth,
Both vale of tears and vale of mirth,
That life is just a batsman's innings
During which the bowler flings
Opportunities galore
To make a duck or make a score.
Let's note as well the game's divinity
Is right and properly, a trinity:

Umpires three, two white of coat,
On field, appealed to, but remote,
The third a camera's focussed eye
That lets no peccadillo by.

And as in life, so too in cricket,
It's how you play the sticky wicket
That measures real and true success.
It's courage, skill, fair play, finesse
Far more than runs galore or winning
Redeem the game and grant it meaning.

All the world's a cricket pitch,
On which to tease from life, the bitch,
Sense and meaning, virtue, duty,
Purpose, love, delight and beauty.
Unless we read life's meaning right
We die perplexed, confused, in fright.
Our pointless life before us flashes
Then dust to dust and ash to ashes.

Cricket too is much the same.
If wrongly played, a pointless game,
The which, when all's been said and done,
Even if a test is won
The truth, too soon, before us flashes,
That all we earn's an urn of ashes.

*St Mary's Nether Stowey,
Somerset*



(633) “This and That” - 4 January 2026

Canon Andrew Neaum - Behind the Balustrade

“No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference” maintained Charles Lamb (1775-1834). “It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.” True enough, I suppose, but it is with a snore that I like to welcome the New Year. It seems that my parents drummed into me successfully that the New Year that really matters is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Church’s liturgical year.

To hell with good intentions

P. J. O’Rourke quipped: “the proper behaviour all through the holiday season is to be drunk. This drunkenness culminates on New Year’s Eve, when you get so drunk you kiss the

person you’re married to.” Mark Twain, more wisely but just as cynically, maintained that New Year’s Day “is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving the road to hell with them as usual.”

Table talk

The best dinner parties are those with a table small enough for conversations to swell out and include all the guests present and yet large enough to allow them to recede into the intimate eddies that are tête-à-têtes.

A recent and interesting table conversation had to do with “duty”. One of my table companions informed me that she had gone to church on the previous Sunday “for the first time in ages”. She then asked me the reason for going to church and with hardly a thought I replied, “duty”. We are to go to church, if we are serious Christians, because it is our duty to do so. On being prompted I elaborated a little by suggesting that we don’t go to church to be edified, uplifted, spiritually nourished, earn God’s favour or to get anything out of it at all. We go because it is our duty to do so, as directed by Jesus of Nazareth, ‘do this in remembrance of me.’ Anything we do get out of going is incidental, a desirable bonus to be received with gratitude.



St Mary's Orcheston, Wiltshire



Ralph of Srewsbury's tomb: Wells Cathedral, Somerset

so to abandon any sense of duty and obligation in favour of facile forms of utilitarianism. It seems that I am more a deontologist than a utilitarian.

Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill

As with any good conversation, this one set me thinking. It took me back to my dimly remembered and somewhat desultory study of ethics as a theological student, reminding me of the difference between deontological ethics (all to do with duty and associated with Immanuel Kant) and utilitarian ethics (all to do with the consequences of our actions and associated with John Stuart Mill).

To be a truly moral person is a complicated business. When making difficult decisions about what is right or wrong, it is all too easy to fall back upon “common sense” and mere habit instead of serious thought, and

Repent you swine

Here's a snippet from my file of quotations taken from an essay on deontology by a certain M S Russo, about whom I can find nothing on the internet, "the person of good will", he or she says...

"for Kant is precisely that person who performs good acts simply because it is his duty to perform them and perhaps even despite his inclinations to do otherwise. Thus the man who is naturally generous is not behaving morally, when, because of a feeling of pity he gives money to a woman begging. On the other hand, the person who is inclined to be stingy, but who gives to this same woman out of a sense of duty, is the truly moral person for Kant.

"The next question that Kant raises is, 'how do we know where our duty lies?' The answer is that our duty lies in obedience to a particular rule, principle or law regardless of inclination, self-interest, or consequences. It lies in following a command that must be obeyed for its own sake. Kant calls this supreme principle of all morality the Categorical Imperative....."



Sulphur Crested Cockatoos

Only a facile utilitarian (there are forms of utilitarianism that are very far from facile and indeed compelling) could ever say to their parson, as so many Christians who fail to fulfil their obligation to attend church do. "... I have never done anyone any harm. I am a good person". The proper response to this self-justifying clap trap is, "...but have you done your duty, fulfilled your obligations to others and to God? If you have not you are very far from being a good person. Repent you swine and seek absolution!"

Entranced cockatoos

In my last Australian parish flocks of sulphur crested cockatoos regularly visited the garden to devastate our walnut tree. They stole the majority of its nuts and messily and mischevously stripped many of its leaves in collateral damage.

Once, for dessert, they decided to perch on the side of a very small garden pool where, with a remarkably dexterous foot, they plucked bursting, pink water lily buds to lift to their great, grey beaks. Whereupon, in what appeared to be trance-like pleasure, they slowly and methodically ate their way through them as lovely pink flakes fell gently to the water or ground about them like rose petals thrown before and over a bride.

As usual when I observe animals and birds I found myself empathising with them. The lovely sight took me straight back to a Christmas meal some years before at which hibiscus flowers in syrup accompanied the champagne. The cockatoo's dreamy pleasure in consuming exquisitely beautiful water lily buds appeared to me not at all dissimilar to mine, then.



The water lily pond, St Augustine's Rectory, Shepparton, Australia

The cockatoo's dreamy pleasure in consuming exquisitely beautiful water lily buds appeared to me not at all dissimilar to mine, then.

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