

MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS



by David Marsden-Jones

“ old men forget ”

It isn't true. The World Wide Web is not like the giant library they say it is. Libraries are much better organised. It would be more accurate to compare entering the Web to being set down in some vast conurbation with highways in all directions, but with few signposts.

Yes I have, perhaps unwisely, entered the stimulating world of computers. Understanding the logic of computers (to say nothing of the jargon) is certainly a good way of concentrating the mind. But if I am to use the e-mail facility, I must learn to type - properly. And at my age! Friends say encouragingly this will come, but only with practice, and tell me of their example in typing out their reminiscences. Hence this exercise, which I expect will also be quite an exercise in memory - while still have some.

Memories, Reflections

All through the years of my early childhood churchgoing on a Sunday was as much part of life as the wallpaper (and had about as much effect on me perhaps). I did not think of it as anything other than the natural thing to do, and I do not recall the matter ever being discussed. I regret this now, but I guess my parents would have seen little point in talking over what to them was so obviously right and true. Certainly to have questioned the Faith or the Church would have been unthinkable. Because of their innate reticence on such matters I have no real knowledge of my parents' inner beliefs, but I expect they were of the conventional establishment of their day. As a newly ordained curate I once asked my father on what I should preach when stuck for a theme. He unhesitatingly replied, 'prayer'. Whether this was an indication of how much prayer meant to him I do not know, for I did not pursue the matter. Certainly I think my father had a serene faith untroubled by doubts, which makes me suppose it is from my mother I have inherited my often uncomfortable habit of questioning everything to do with faith and belief.

It was in those early formative years - aged somewhere between six and nine I guess, I had what I later came to know, is called an 'oceanic experience'. I can recall the moment with the greatest clarity. I was playing alone under the kitchen table in the semi-dark for the table had a long table cloth which reached to the floor. There suddenly came upon that small boy an extraordinary sensation, which I still find hard to describe, so I will not attempt to do so. But when many years later I read the mediaeval mystic Julian of Norwich's words, 'And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well', I knew at once precisely what she meant, for that was what I had overwhelmingly experienced. A sense of being held in utter security, with a serene conviction of its rightness. But words are hopelessly lame and inadequate at communicating such experiences. Despite the amazing ability of language to cause precise new combinations of ideas and thoughts to arise in other's minds, there are times, as now, when it fails.

Although I can now recall vividly that moment, such-was the fickleness of the memory of that small boy, it was soon forgotten until one day some years later when I read for the first time, Wordsworth's ode, 'Intimations of Immortality' from 'Recollections of Early Childhood'. At once the memory of it flooded over me and I was transported from that prosaic classroom back to that intense moment under the kitchen table.

I did not then attach any religious significance to the episode and I do not necessarily do so now, for 'oceanic experiences' are not uncommon and can be explained psychologically, which the agnostic part of me is ready to accept. If such experiences can be construed as manifestations of the divine, they can also be construed in other ways. Yet there lingers the doubt that such events can be dismissed by reductive explanations however plausible.

II

In my last year at school the Headmaster had introduced me to Plato's Republic, but it was only when I started reading it in earnest on entering the Honours Philosophy course at University (UCW Aberystwyth) that my eyes were opened to the value of asking questions - of entering into a kind of Socratic dialogue with myself, a habit which for better or worse, has never left me. Over the years it has led to many inner conflicts between faith and doubt, belief and unbelief.

There followed an interval of four and a half years in war-time navy (accompanied by Plato's Republic - until the copy was lost with the ship I was in). After the usual basic training and square bashing I found myself drafted as an Ordinary Seaman to a Hunt class destroyer HMS Cowdray, newly commissioned on the Clyde. The Cowdray as a convoy escort was well provided with depth charges mounted on the stern and on the quarters. It was the depth charge launcher on the starboard quarter that once saved my life. It was blowing a fierce gale at the time and life lines had been rigged along the iron deck, but foolishly I hadn't bothered to grab the running line as I made my way aft one dark night. As the ship suddenly heeled over, my feet slipped from under me and I went hurtling towards the ship's side, but was saved from going over the side by crashing into the depth charge launcher. Had I been a foot further for'ard or aft I would certainly have gone overboard. At the time we were on our way back from escorting a couple of tankers intended for the re-fuelling of Fleet destroyers on a sweep for the Tirpitz. Having escorted the tankers to Spitzbergen, and seen the destroyers re-fuelled, on our way home we were ordered to join other ships escorting HMS Somali, a Tribal class destroyer that had been torpedoed. A sister ship, the Ashanti took her in tow, a slow and hazardous business. During a dark and stormy night the tow parted and Somali began to break up, and escorting ships were ordered to burn their searchlights on the sinking ship. It was a risk that had to be taken if there was to be any chance of rescuing the 80 crew remaining aboard. I fear 36 were lost.

I shall never forget that dramatic scene centred on the sinking ship held in the light of several searchlights as she went down stern first. Watching a ship go down is an infinitely sad sight, never more so than on that occasion. It moved me greatly. It still does when I bring it to mind.

Another unhappy occasion I remember was when we picked up the handful of survivors from the cruiser Curacoa which had been rammed by the Queen Mary some 40 miles off the Donegal coast. The Queen Mary as a fast troop ship did the Atlantic crossing unescorted except when close enough to home to be within enemy aircraft range. On this occasion the light cruiser Curacoa was engaged in this escorting duty when disaster struck. Both ships were apparently on a zig-zag course and by some dreadful mistake the cruiser crossed the bows of the liner, turned over and was sunk in a very few minutes with the loss of nearly all hands. The Queen Mary full of troops did not dare stop and steamed on at full speed. We were in Londonderry when the signal came to search the area for survivors, but we and an accompanying frigate found only a dozen or so, and some of those having ingested fuel oil were in a bad way.

Of course we had no idea at the time of what had happened, and when we arrived back on the Clyde a few days later we saw the Queen Mary with a great dent in her bows but did not connect it with the loss of the cruiser. Indeed it was only after the war when the result of the inquiry into the disaster was published that I learned the true facts. The Queen Mary was exonerated of any blame. The disaster was held to be caused by an error on the part of the cruiser.

After the North Atlantic, it was a pleasant change to be sent to the Mediterranean, based in Gibraltar. I remember we escorted the carrier HMS Furious while she flew off Spitfires for the defence of Malta. We then joined Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa, covering the Algiers landing. On the evening of the invasion day we and a Fleet minesweeper were on an anti-submarine patrol outside the harbour when we were attacked by a small force of Italian torpedo bombers and Junkers 88. We dodged the torpedos successfully, but were caught by a bomb which hit the iron deck just abaft the fo'csle, and exploded in the engine room killing everyone below and bringing us to a sudden stop. The minesweeper (HMS Algerine I think) came alongside presently and we stepped off without even getting our feet wet. It was a short and sharp action and exciting enough while it lasted, but really no big deal - except for the poor stokers and engine room artificers of course, for whom I'm afraid it was the final deal. I heard after the war that the ship did not sink but drifted ashore somewhere, and was subsequently salvaged and refitted.

III

After the loss of the Cowdray I came home in an empty troop ship. I somehow got through an Admiralty Selection Board for a commission and a few months later emerged from HMS King Alfred (Hove) a Temporary Acting Sub-Lieutenant RNVR. And very 'wet behind the ears' I was too. I was then sent on a course at the R.N.College Greenwich, and from there went on to join the staff of the Thames Naval Control Officer, based at Southend, where I was to meet a pretty little Wren who one day was to become my wife (quite the best thing that ever happened to me). I was one of a team of Boarding Officers whose job it was to contact each merchant ship sailing around the Thames Estuary to ensure she had the correct routes and up to date charts (marking swept channels etc) to her destination. I clambered up more rope ladders than I care to remember. It was perfectly safe except when there was a sea running and one had to time very carefully the jump from the deck to the dangling rope ladder and make the climb up - which could be quite a long one if it was a big freighter in ballast. I got to meet a lot of merchant navy Masters of many nationalities, and their Second Officers who are the navigators. And what a fine lot of men they were.

One small incident stands out from this time. I was stepping off on to my boat from the lower level deck of the pier, the next thing I remembered was being hauled out of the water by one of the crew. Apparently I had succeeded in knocking myself out on the pier as I went down. Brilliant achievement! I had to endure a lot of chaff about how many I'd had ashore. In fact I hadn't had a drop (for once) and was stone cold sober. Sadly, the dip in the salt water ruined the nice gold watch my parents had given me for my twenty-first birthday, but I was very lucky that nothing worse befell me.

My next posting was to Taranto, and later - with my second stripe shipped - to be NCSO Haifa. By then there was very little to do and I took the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and the usual pilgrim sites. I am rather glad I had the chance to see those places when there were no more than just a few servicemen around. I am told they have since become much commercialised. But it was a great feeling when my demob signal came through and I could start on my return journey, via Port Said where I thumbed a lift to Marseilles, and then by troop train to Calais, ferry to Dover and home.

Looking back on those years in the navy, I think they were valuable not least for the insights I gained into human character. I'd had a rather sheltered upbringing, and being suddenly thrust into the completely

different environment of the lower deck was something of a culture shock.

Some of my new messmates were a tough lot who expressed themselves without inhibition in colourful terms, and my vocabulary, if not improved, was much enlarged. However, what chiefly stands out in my memory of those days is the complete absence of any privacy. There were times when I found it hard to bear. Surrounded by others, with no means of escape, I often felt very lonely. It taught me the value of solitude - and of silence, something rarely found in a small warship. In those days a little peace and quiet would have been a welcome break in the continuous noise. Many years later when I went on the first of many retreats, I discovered that there is a deeper silence which is more than the mere absence of noise, and has its own uniquely positive element. But my first appreciation of the value of silence was in the noisy wartime navy.

IV

When I returned to my studies, I decided not to take up my old place at University College Aberystwyth, but applied to enter the three year course on offer to ex-servicemen at St David's College, Lampeter. It would be only a pass degree but it included the necessary qualification for ordination were I to decide eventually to seek ordination. And with marriage on the near horizon, just three years to completion was an attraction which far outweighed any ambition I might have had for academic achievement.

My first enlightening discovery came from my introduction to Biblical criticism. It was a welcome revelation that the Bible was not to be taken as literal truth but was subject to critical scrutiny as any ancient text. I remember one of our tutors saying that if any of us felt shaken or disturbed in our faith by the studies in which we were to be engaged, he would offer help. He meant well, but to me the opposite was the case, for I found the demise of literal fundamentalism glad tidings. Astonishingly one hears of it still surviving among the more extreme evangelical sects. Surely the theological equivalent of flat earthism.

Reading Philosophy of Religion I arrived (albeit reluctantly) at the conclusion that there are no compelling rational grounds for belief in God. So I had to acknowledge that atheism is always a possibility, and that there is a real sense in which the existence of God is doubtful. So when the atheist in me challenges me to establish my claim that God is knowable, I cannot answer, at least not in terms he will accept. The plain truth is, God is not verifiable and never has been. We can only speak of

knowing God by faith, and arguments that set out to prove his existence can do little more than demonstrate theism's intellectual respectability, in other words that it is not irrational to believe. So if, as I have come to see, there are no arguments that compel belief in God, the question that arises is, should we look for them? It was Pascal who asserted long ago that we seek philosophical truths merely out of human pride. To require compelling reasons to believe in God is to place those reasons above that transcendent Reality, and of course renders faith otiose.

Faith can never be demonstrable knowledge (just as the opposite is not demonstrable either), and the only basis for faith is the authority of faith itself, and it is no less authoritative for fluctuating, as it does for most thoughtful believers. "Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief" cried the boy's desperate father in the Gospel, and that is a prayer made by many who have recognised that faith and doubt are but two sides of the same coin.

When one comes to think about it further, it is clear that our human capacity for faith (in anything) is ultimately not just the only ground we have for asserting any objective truth, but also the only ground for believing that there is any such thing as objective truth.

V

The parish in which I served my 'title' was a large industrial parish where most of the working population were employed at one of the three Courtaulds factories in the town, engaged in rayon manufacture (later to be replaced by nylon, with consequent factory closures and unemployment.) It was a somewhat mono-chrome parish, although the people were varied enough as individuals. A rich mixture of native Welsh, Scousers, Lancashire and Black County folk and immigrant Irish, et al. attracted to the area many generations earlier by the employment opportunities offered. Unfortunately for the Church it had to contend with the relics of unhappy industrial relations in the past. Before Courtaulds and trade unions came on the scene the major employer was notorious for declaring a sudden lock-out, - no 'dole' in those days of course. Later they would open their gates again to new immigrant labour, taken on at reduced wages . Unhappily for the Church the factory owners were "Church" - a Church primary school carried the family name. So the Church had become associated with the bosses. Although many generations had passed since those bad old days, the memory lingered on. I remember a campaign by the local Labour party around the slogan "Ask your Dad", which I dare say helped them win the election. The seeds of my own brand of Christian Socialism were sown at this time, nurtured by

Bishop Gore's "Christ and Society". A book long out of print, and I dare say out of date, but not without influence in its day.

But the people of Oakenholt were a wonderfully warm-hearted lot who made the new curate and his wife feel very welcome. I recall from my early days there, nervously standing on a doorstep while a small child called out "It's the new curate Mam", and there came from the back "Wot the 'ell does 'e want". But once inside there was no doubting the warmth of the reception. The people with whom I came into daily contact were an endearing lot. Their emotions were never far below the surface, and with tempers on a short fuse, life was often interesting. Nevertheless there were few lasting animosities. There is often a lot to be said for the "let it all hang out" attitude.

I had once thought of going back into the navy as a chaplain, and went so far as to write to the Archdeacon of the Navy (as the senior chaplain is curiously called). I received an encouraging reply and was invited to write again after gaining some experience as a parish priest. But as the years went by I found I loved parish life, and the idea of doing anything else never entered my head again.

VI

After five happy years I decided on a complete change, and accepted an invitation from the Vicar of Forest Row in Sussex to a curacy, taking charge of a daughter church at Ashurst Wood. We could have hardly entered on a more different scene. From the rough and tumble of a large urban working class parish to the genteel surroundings of rural Sussex. But as I soon discovered, and found again and again, once cultural differences have been penetrated, people are - well, just people. (Hardly an earth-shattering discovery.) However different their background and circumstances, people share what are essentially the same troubles, and beneath the veneer have the same uncertainties about life. Cultural differences have an enormous impact of course, as nobody can deny, but they do not entirely make us what we are, though there are some who would have it so. The nurture versus nature debate will doubtless go on forever, for these two influences condition us for most of the time (but not quite all). As a keen observer of human nature I have often noticed that nature has a way of asserting herself in surprising ways. My comparatively long ministries in two parishes provided opportunity to know two and sometimes three generations of a family, and one could not fail to notice the power of genetic inheritance - for good and ill. I remember a mother saying ruefully that one of the depressing things of parenthood was seeing one's own faults and failings coming out in one's

children. But nurture or nature, the dynamic for our actions is chiefly our emotions. We fondly think that reason rules in our lives, but I doubt that it is so as often as we would like to believe. Generally speaking, people act and react as their emotions dictate, and only afterwards think up reasons for what they have said and done. This applies across all class divisions, the only difference being that the more educated are cleverer at thinking up rational grounds for what is quite often wholly irrational behaviour.

When I bring to mind those two years in Ashurst Wood, they appear as through a gentle summer haze. Memories of long rambles over the Ashdown Forest with the Youth Club, badminton in the Church Hall, cricket on a day off, visiting round my little patch, nearly always on foot or on a bike. In retrospect the sun seemed to have been always shining - metaphorically it always was. But then - awful memory- there was the day I forgot a funeral which I was to conduct in Forest Row. The 'phone rang and an agitated undertaker asked "What about this funeral then?". A heart stopping moment. I hurtled down the road at a speed my little Morris Minor never knew it could do, (nor did I) and arrived breathlessly at the church and the waiting mourners and cortege. Abject apologies all round, expecting to have my head chewed off and quite rightly too; not at all. They really couldn't have been nicer; they quite understood it was a moment of forgetfulness and I was to think nothing more of it. I did though and vowed never have such a thing happen again - and mercifully it never did, such was the lasting shock of that occasion.

Among the friends we made at this time were a delightful Jewish couple. It was an unlikely friendship, not only on account of our differing faiths, but also because they were more than twice our age. They both came from old Anglo-Jewish families, and lived in considerable style in a large country house on the edge of the parish. Different though we were in so many ways, he and I found a great deal to talk about, although I do not recall any great theological discussions. I once asked him if the Jews were still expecting the Messiah. The question foxed him, and I still don't know the answer to my question. They were charming people - slightly eccentric, and we remember them with affection.

I have always found anti-semitism totally inexplicable. (Of course anti-semitism is a misnomer, for the Arab world is semitic - they too are sons of Shem- and there has been no comparable persecution of Arabs). Whatever blame attaches to the Church of the Middle Ages for fomenting anti-Jewish sentiment, and sadly there is undoubtedly some, it has long ceased to be so. Why then should Jews suffer as historically they have done? What race has contributed more to the welfare of mankind? It is difficult to think of any sphere in the sciences or humanities where they

have not made a notable and often seminal contribution. If I were a Jew I would have every reason to have a proper pride in my race. And as we are reminded each Sunday by the Old Testament readings in the liturgy, Judaism is the rock from which our Christian faith is hewn.

VII

After those two blissful years in Ashurst Wood there came the offer of my first 'living'. In those days it was usual for a curate to wait on average about ten years before he was thought fit to have his own parish, (it's a bit different nowadays) so I was lucky to be offered the parish of Copthorne after just seven years before the mast. Copthorne was a tiny parish on the Surrey/Sussex border, in those days a mere 300-400 souls, and had changed but little in the last two hundred years or so. In Regency times Copthorne was notorious for its illicit prize fighting. Bare-knuckle affairs, usually fought to a brutal end after limitless rounds. The venue was the Common, favoured for its proximity to the county boundary. It was also convenient for the Regency bucks who followed the fancy for it was near enough to Crawley and its George Inn, a well known coaching stage on the London/Brighton road. Copthorne Common was a much favoured site for gypsies and assorted riff-raff, and in the not too distant past had become infamous for its frequent brawls. Even in my day there were some remnants of that tough element still around. But nearby Crawley New Town and Gatwick's development from a grass airfield into London's second airport were soon to change the place out of all recognition. In the thirteen years we were in Copthorne we saw it expand and change dramatically.

Not long after arriving in my new parish I was presented with a problem for which I'd had no preparation in theological college - a house which the owners believed was haunted. Now I have a natural scepticism in such things (I have yet to find a theory about ghosts which relates in any way to the doctrine of the Resurrection) so I referred the problem to our suffragan bishop, who one day came to the parish and said Mass in the house. To everyone's considerable satisfaction the hauntings ceased, only to return later with increased frequency. Mystified by all this paranormal business, but anxious to do my best for my parishioners, I contacted a

priest who was a well-known exorcist. He duly arrived one day, said many prayers and muttered to me something about ley lines (which I failed to understand) and told me I should follow up his visit with another Mass, in the presence of the whole family. Which I did, and to the general relief, from that day on there were no further problems. Many years later when on a visit to Copthorne we called at the house and on

enquiry heard the glad news that they'd had no more untoward manifestations whatever.

That was the first of such problems I encountered. Others did not require such measures. I remember the Bishop once telephoning to say he had received a request from one of my parishioners to exorcise some spirit from her house. Knowing the circumstances I was able to assure the Bishop that the spirits involved were almost certainly of the bottled kind.

The 60's was a decade which saw a sea change in practically every area of life, as those of us who lived through it will testify. With the gift of hindsight we can see that much of it was mistaken, or just plain silly, yet out of that era came a new freedom of the spirit for which we cannot but be grateful. Naturally such changes affected the local church and there was much to be done.

I had been much influenced by the teaching of Dom Gregory Dix's "The Shape of the Liturgy" and the style and pattern of worship at the parish church changed accordingly. These personal meanderings are not the place to go into this, but my intention was greatly advanced when, after much preparation, I invited a well-known Cowley Father to conduct a ten-day teaching mission in the parish. He was a remarkable priest who worked non-stop, doing nothing by half measures (when day's work was done he could do serious damage to a bottle of whisky with a rapidity that would have made Rasputin stand up and cheer). Joan and I were thoroughly worn out when it was all over. But there was no doubt about his effectiveness as a missionary - I had the largest adult confirmation class I've ever had. It was a very busy time in my ministry, and I could have done with some priestly assistance. Luckily I had some splendid Lay Readers, one of whom became a dear friend. Joan and I love to meet up from time to time in some convenient mid-way pub.

After this Mission I rather wondered if it was time to move on. I have always admired the Benedictine rule of 'stabilitas'. St. Benedict required his monks to stay where God had placed them, and not go wandering around from monastery to monastery. Monks take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, so they do as they are told. I'm not particularly poor, chaste or obedient, but I think there is something inherently right about 'stabilitas' in the priestly life, - so I stayed .

VIII

A few years later the Bishop wrote asking me if I would consider going to Bosham. Where was Bosham? A dot on the map which eventually I

found. We motored down one day and found a beautiful village (the tide happened to be in - when the tide is out Bosham is a slut) and a lovely old church, but not much else so far as we could see. It all seemed so quiet and peaceful that I wondered if I would fit into the scene, and my initial response was to tell the Bishop I wasn't at all sure I was the right man. He thought I was, as did the Bishop of Horsham. The Italians have a word for the condition I found myself in; 'amletico' torn by indecision "to be or not to be"! It was after much thought and prayer the decision was made to accept. And forever after we've been heartily glad that such was the decision. It was with greatly mixed feelings we left Copthorne where we had spent over thirteen happy years, and when the moment to go arrived, it was quite a wrench. I was not so sorry to give up being Rural Dean of East Grinstead. It was at the time when synodical government was being introduced in the Church of England, and there were endless committee meetings. I remember once totting up all the committees I was on, and being appalled. When we moved to Bosham I was more than a little tired, and although I did not recognise the symptoms at the time, my coronary arteries were diseased and giving trouble. My new doctor (and later very good friend,) swiftly diagnosed the problem with his customary precision, and after three weeks in hospital and correct medication, life gradually came back to something resembling normal, although I do not think I ever completely regained the lost energy. But I never dreamt that the condition would one day compel me to take early retirement.

Moving to Bosham meant a change of pace, and not entirely because of my angina. In sharp contrast to my last parish the congregation had a somewhat elderly look. From the Copthorne pulpit I had looked on people mostly of my own age or younger. In Bosham the view was of mostly older people, which of course reflected the high proportion of retired folk in the village. But Bosham turned out to be (as the Bishop had said) not the sleepy parish for which it can be so easily mistaken by the casual visitor. There was much to do, building on the work of my predecessors, one of whom was living in the village, and quickly became a good friend.

Arrival in a parish is always a busy time for a new Incumbent as he tries to get to know his parish and find his feet. However, dealing pastorally with mostly, but by no means entirely, an older generation I was conscious that life had slowed quite a bit. I gratefully adjusted to the new tempo and began to see much virtue in it. I found that I was reflecting more on my work - what it was really all about. On the face of it, it may seem ridiculous to engage in that kind of re-think after twenty years in

the priesthood, but I am grateful for the radical stock taking that took place.

I found to my chagrin (good for my humility) that much of my previous busy-ness had been motivated by my own compulsive need to prove myself - to myself. I began reading more widely, not as hitherto only that which pertained to the job in hand. And, dare I say it, thinking more, and finding that the old truths were not only still valid, but when interpreted free from the shackles of literalism were capable of revealing new and deeper realities, to which they have of course always pointed.

T.S.Eliot (who else) has it: -

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

IX

Looking back on a long pastoral ministry as I have been doing since putting on paper these idle ramblings, I am faintly surprised that I seem to have been involved in one way or another with so many of the mentally ill among my parishioners. Perhaps some latent neurosis of my own unconsciously prompted an empathy with them. And also perhaps my dismay that so often mental illness is still, even today, thought of as somehow the fault of the individual. A single example will illustrate the point.

One evening Joan answered the doorbell. A dishevelled figure stood there asking for a drink of water. It quickly emerged he was no tramp, but it became equally clear he had no idea where he was, where he was going, or even who he was. Complete amnesia. I need not go into the details of how we eventually discovered he was a scientist engaged in secret government work - the police had been looking for him ever since his mysterious disappearance some days earlier. Eventually Joan and I took him back to his wife who was staying with her mother in London. What a reception he got from his mother-in-law! Despite the clearest evidence of a severe mental illness, it was held to be all his fault. The mentally ill often do not get the sympathy they deserve.

Psychoses are very serious illnesses of course. I remember one morning a lady came in to my study, and presently told me with the greatest solemnity that the announcer on the BBC news that morning had again made repeated personal references to her in the course of reading the

news bulletin, and what was I going to do about it? The line between what we consider normal behaviour and abnormal is not always so clear cut. If a man comes along announcing that he is a poached egg, we may reasonably conclude that all is not well with him, but there are times when the borderline between eccentricity and mental illness is blurred, and is the cause of much ribaldry and ridicule. I remember one such eccentric who was forever teetering on the edge of insanity. When the boundary was crossed, the sooner in-treatment was begun the better, but as her doctor said, getting her to go into hospital voluntarily a.s.a.p. was a problem. One day I managed to get her to agree that it was best for her to go into hospital, and before she could change her mind again, bundled her into the car. But realising she would surely want to get out again before very long, I collected Joan to sit in the back seat with her, and in order to distract her from opening the door of the moving car Joan thought of the idea of getting her to sing as many hymns as she could remember. Together they went a fair way through the hymn book. It was a long drive across East Sussex to the hospital, and Joan was exhausted (and rather hoarse) by the time we got there.

Joan frequently came to my aid. I recall another instance when a man stood on our doorstep in a state of great agitation. His wife was a severe depressive who was threatening suicide and he feared to leave her alone in their remote cottage when he was at work. While I was considering the situation and wondering what to do, Joan appeared and said that of course she would take care of her, and so she moved in to the Vicarage, going home to her husband at week-ends. Eventually she was restored to her family fit and well. Joan's unfailing quiet understanding and cheerful care once again worked wonders. Depression is a very common ailment, as doctors will testify, but there is all the difference in the world between an occasional "fit of the blues" and clinical depression which needs medication and in severe cases hospital treatment.

X

Being with the mentally ill is not always gloom and doom. I can think of some, ordinarily perhaps rather dull people, who in their disturbed state could be extremely amusing. It was as if their imagination had been set free of the trammels of everyday life by their abnormal mental state. They could be marvellously entertaining with wonderful stories to tell, which had they been less confused would have made a good novel.

On one occasion while visiting in a mental hospital I was accosted by a patient, (which is always a possibility, even a probability if wearing a dog collar). She proceeded to talk in the greatest detail of daily life in ancient

Rome. She was obviously well read in the subject, classically educated I would guess, but fascinatingly it was all related in the first person present. She vividly described events in Roman times of which she was a contemporary witness. Deeply disturbed in mind as the poor lady was, it was a gripping if somewhat incoherent account, and it certainly held my attention. However she seemed little troubled by it all.

Visiting patients in our local mental hospital, I was often impressed by some of the strikingly imaginative paintings that decorated the wards. They were mostly the work of schizophrenics, conveying I suppose something of the fantastic world in which they live.

The wild mood swings of the manic depressive are another matter altogether. In their depressed state life is impossibly grim, a burden and a pain to them. In their manic phase life is a pain for those with whom they live. I recall a manic depressive asking me to countersign his application for a shot-gun licence. I knew he was not to be trusted with so much as a pea-shooter, and my first instinct was to give an outright refusal. But then I quickly thought he would probably bounce someone who didn't know him as well as I did into giving him the required signature. So I signed. He was no sooner out of the door than I was on the telephone to the Police Sergeant in charge of gun licensing explaining the position. "Don't worry" he said, "he'll not get a licence". And he didn't.

The mentally ill are very vulnerable people who have an even greater need of those resources which go beyond the merely human. I remember one who was going through a deep vale of terrible despair quietly telling me, "I just keep repeating 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord who hath made heaven and earth' and it gets me through the awful darkness". She was quoting the opening verses of Psalm 121 (in the old Prayer Book version - still the best). I learned much from such faith in the face of dreadful adversity, of whose depth and horror we can but half guess. Ministering to the mentally frail I came to realise that frequently I was receiving more than I was giving.

XI

Inheriting an active church from my predecessors, and a very welcoming congregation, we were soon made to feel at home and part of the Bosham community. Working from home as any Incumbent has to, it is sensible to try and get away from the Vicarage door and telephone bells on the weekly day off. In Copthorne that was difficult with a large Victorian garden to maintain, but as Bosham Vicarage had a modest garden, that did not present a problem. Neither did the availability of an escape route

for the waters of the creek were but a few yards from the front gate. Kind friends had introduced me to the delights of Chichester Harbour and it wasn't long before I bought my first dinghy. I had four different dinghies (not at the same time) and finally settled on one that suited my needs admirably — a Devon Yawl. Weather permitting, I sailed her once a week throughout the sailing season each year until my retirement, when I sold her (not without shedding a furtive tear). Luckily for me I can still get out on the water on a summer's day with a friend, and even if we catch no fish, the company of a valued friend is always good, and we've spent many a happy hour together spinning for mackerel and bass in and outside the harbour.

Friendship is a precious gift and greatly to be cherished. Joan and I have always been lucky in this wherever we've been, but never more so than in Bosham where we are now fortunate to live in retirement with many good friends around. Such a friend and I were one evening lamenting the poor programmes on television and agreeing that watching the box was usually a boring waste of time. So, would it not be a good idea to form a small group of like-minded but disparate men that would meet to discuss whatever subject the host speaker chose? I do not think we made a conscious decision not to include women - we simply did not think of any when deciding whom we would invite to join us. Thus came into being the 'Eclectics'. There are just eight of us- kept to that number so that we can fit comfortably in each other's homes. To illustrate the appropriateness of our name, here at random, are some of the subjects that have been discussed over the past few years:- Modern art; Euthanasia; The mind/brain problem; History of flight; The spread of Islam; Hungarian history, The European Union; Comparative religion; Quantum mechanics!; Development of navigation; Livingstone's African explorations; Lawrence of Arabia; S.African history; Alternative sources of power; the Theatre, and many more topics just as varied. Nobody pretends to expertise on the subject he has chosen to introduce. Usually the host speaker has done his homework and 'boned-up' on a subject that appeals to him, and which he hopes is of sufficient general interest to start a discussion when he has finished his introduction. This is always achieved without too much difficulty, even if we wander off the subject a bit, (as we often tend to do) for we are invariably given something worth thinking about.

This raises an interesting question. Why does the mind always have to have something to occupy it? If we have nothing on our minds that requires our brains to work, our minds will think of something to think about, trivial though it may be, rather like Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness soliloquy in the last chapter of James Joyce's "Ulysses"

(but not so interesting). If the 'Eclectics' group has done nothing else it saves us from the mental sloth which is the first step down the slippery slope that leads to anomie; a condition rightly to be feared.

XII

It is surely one of the joys of retirement to have no pressing duties. As the years have gone by since I retired I find myself less and less inclined to do even the occasional service in neighbouring parishes, and have agreed to do so only in dire emergency. I am privileged to be asked to celebrate the Holy Mysteries at 8 O'clock here in Bosham on the first Sunday every month and at major festivals, and it is a joy to do so. On other Sundays I can do what I often longed to do when working in a parish - sit in the congregation. The laity are under a misapprehension if they believe that the clergy are forever wanting to harangue them. Speaking for myself, and I believe, for the brethren I have known, such is far from the case (there are exceptions mind!); they are usually only too thankful when opportunity arises to merge into the background of the congregation. And what a relief it is not to have to prepare sermons and addresses. I do so nowadays only when asked by my Vicar to give the address at the funeral service of an old parishioner. I do so gladly, and try to do my best when speaking at what is the final occasion when I can be of service to a friend. There is obviously a finality about death, but this isn't to say that death nullifies everything. It may seem utter negativity, but even death can have a positive or affirmative role, and I try to bring this out in reference to the life of my departed friend

Writing this reminds me of a true story which illustrates and underlines the point:-

An old man lay dying, his family standing round the bed. Suddenly he spoke. "There's a bottle of champagne in that cupboard which I'd like you to open". They did so and stood around awkwardly, glass in hand. The dying man opened one eye and said, "What about me then?". So they poured him a drop of the bubbly. "I have had a happy life" he said "and I want you to drink with me to a happy death". They did just that. An hour later he died. A good death in truth. But then, he'd spent his life preparing for it.

XIII

On re-reading this I find it suggests that nowadays my life is spent in idleness. I think that it would be more accurately described as active idleness, an oxymoron that neatly sums it up. Time goes by with

astonishing speed and the day has few longueurs. There's always a book waiting to be picked up, a friend to visit or welcome, a piece of wood to turn, or as now, this toy to play with, or particularly at night (I'm not the world's best sleeper) music to listen to on my little headphones.

I enjoy listening to music, but I am aware that it is on a very superficial level that I am doing so. For me music is a delightful sequence of sounds which have emotional power. A few familiar notes can conjure up vivid memories, but that is all there is to it. I envy the musically gifted for whom music opens doors to what for them is no less than an apprehension of the mystery which is human life. There are people (I have met them) for whom music can have an almost metaphysical character. I'm told the late string quartets of Beethoven can have that effect. They have been described, by those expert enough to say so, as meditations without words or concepts. I find that a difficult notion to grasp, but it must mean that for the musically gifted, music suggests that which lies beyond emotion or aesthetic pleasure. I recall a conversation I had with a lover of music who spoke of the profundities that listening to great music brought. When I asked her how this could be, she could give no answer other than "I know it does". An unsatisfactory answer but I think I understand it, because it has a close affinity with the language of the mystics as they struggle with words to describe their experience.

Clearly, it is undeniably true that for some, music can mean everything, and mean it in a way no words can. Of course this must be true of other non-verbal art forms. There was the famous dancer who replied to the question, "What did that dance mean?" with "If I could have told you I would not have danced it". But the art form that speaks most clearly to me is poetry. It is in this medium pre-eminently that I find worlds opened out to me, worlds which I did not know existed, or if I did, found but little in them. Poetry can evoke thoughts which plumb the depths of one's being and have the power to come back again and again to haunt one.

Consider these lines of T.S.Eliot from 'Four Quartets' - (The Dry Salvages V)

..... .to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint —
No occupation either, but something given
And taken in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight

The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is incarnation.

XIV

Having discovered long ago that poetry, the most verbal of all art forms, moved me so, I wondered if this was simply due to the conditioning of my early years when respect for language and the power of words was instilled in me. Or did it hark back through the Celtic mists to my ancestral past? I suspect a bit of both, for we are as much conditioned to be what we are by the structures of the society in which we live as we are by what we have inherited through our genes. (Not that this makes us into automatons governed entirely by forces outside our control. Most of us need no convincing that we have freedom of choice, despite the hypotheses the determinists have brought forward to explain away free will as a delusion.)

However, in the ongoing nature versus nurture debate, I think I detect from my current reading that the balance has tilted in favour of the former argument. Despite what the sociologists say (much of it unquestionably true) what we have inherited from our forebears obviously has an enormous influence. So 'nature' should have its way, say the evolutionary psychologists, the chief proponents of the 'what is, should be' school. The problem I have with this is that while it may explain why we behave, it has nothing to say on how we ought to behave. And it certainly doesn't say much for human dignity.

Does this matter? I think it surely does, for how we live our lives, what we are, is ultimately decided by what we believe ourselves to be. For those of us who believe, we are no less than (in the words of the old Prayer Book) the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, it is a belief which endlessly affects life. It is a belief greatly to be cherished.

But sadly, it isn't cherished by all. As St. Paul remarked long ago, "not all men have faith." Parish priests are reminded regularly of that truth for they come into contact with "all sorts and conditions of men", and frequently at times when one might think they would be receptive to the appeal of faith. Such as occasions for great rejoicing, as on the arrival of a new baby, a family wedding, or some long awaited re-union. Or at times of gnawing anxiety when serious illness threatens, or of sadness

and grief at the loss of a greatly loved one. Reactions to troubles, of whatever kind, can vary enormously. There are some of whom it could be truly said that suffering ennobled them. Others became embittered. And that is when the unfortunate clergyman had better look out, for as the nearest representative of God to hand, he might find himself the target for their resentful anger. Mercifully, it was rare for someone to really "have a go" and I always tried to take it with fortitude, understanding the reason for their wrath.

It is high time I drew to a close these few memories and desultory reflections upon some of the episodes that seem perhaps to have had some sort of significance in my life and work. But as Shakespeare's Henry V has it, "old men forget" and I am very conscious that in thirty-seven years of pastoral ministry I have forgotten much more than I have been able to remember. But not only that. I have a suspicion that one day we shall discover that what we considered important was of little or no true significance, and what at the time was passed over as a triviality and quickly forgotten was really what made us what we are.

*When that day comes, then truly –
"we shall know, even as we are known. ' ,*

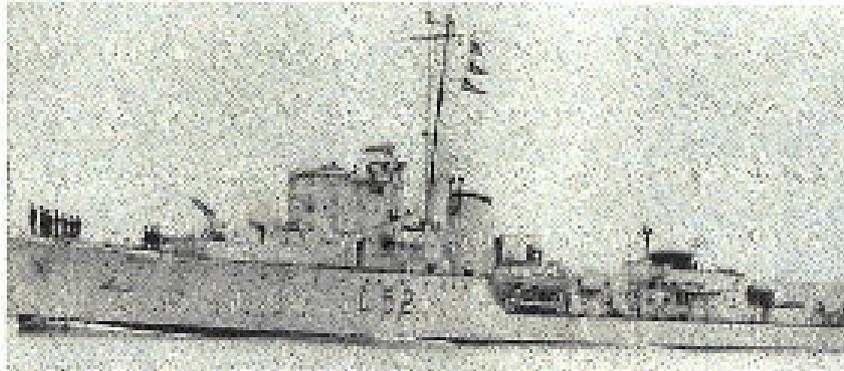
DMJ



Happy septuagenarius



Hosham Vicarage



HMS Casidry



"Jack"



Southend '43



Toronto '44



Wren Kinner



Student '47



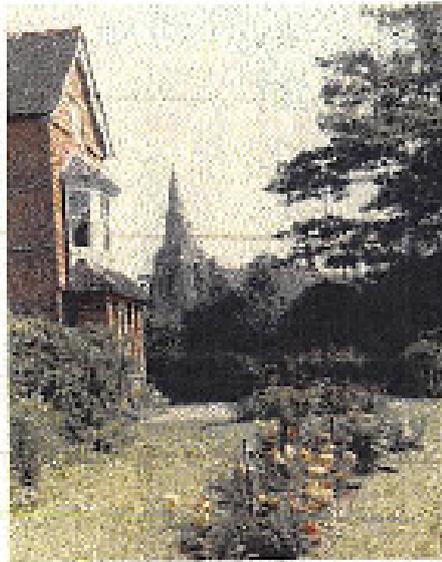
Jean at Aherysych



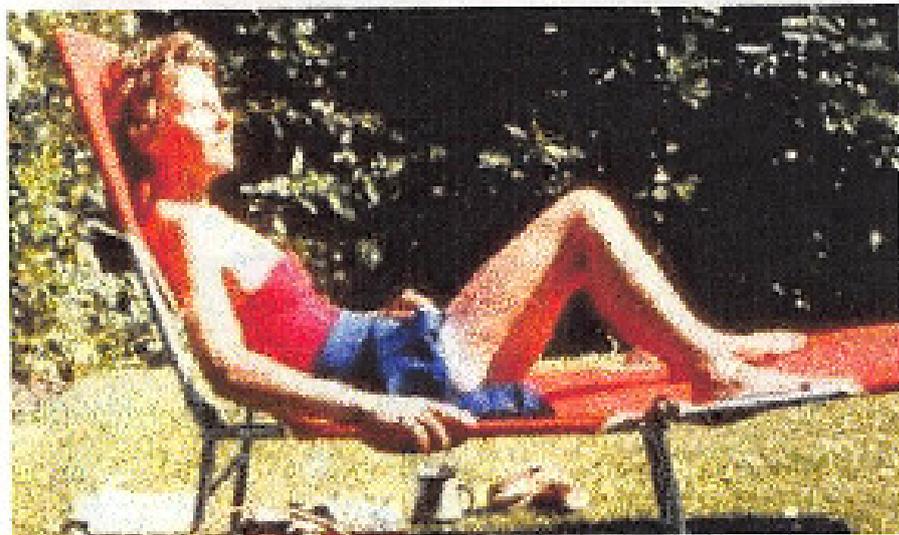
Oakthill Sundry School F.C. 1950



Ashurst Wood Youth Club Runners 1955



View of Copthorne Church from Vicarage, and Victorian Vicarage



Soaking up the sun in Copthorne Vicarage garden



Canal holiday



Joss, my sister and mother at Copthorne Vicarage

