

Daisy Cottage,  
West Wickham,  
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Christmas 1984

Dear Michael & Margaret,

A very happy Christmas and New Year to you all! Coming as it does as a climax, from the weather point of view, to a genuine "annus mirabilis". And for us at least, and I hope for you, an annus memorabilis as well! Way back in June we took advantage of the sunshine to boldly go where we had never been before. We rented a farm cottage on the hillside overlooking Okehampton, and had a marvellous fortnight. Across the valley we had a magnificent view of Yes Tor, (except when the rolling morning mists turned it into No Tor), and our hosts at the farm were most obliging and friendly, attending to our every need. We wandered down leafy Devon lanes hand in hand, and found ourselves in a veritable Botanist's Paradise. On one occasion we vied with one another to discover different kinds of wort, - milk wort, St. John's wort, soap wort, and the extremely rare visitor from the Himalayan heights of Nepal, the Burdthou Neva Wort. It was not good weather for fishing, but in spite of all I managed to land eight (smallish) trout, and one (smallish) eel, which formed a welcome addition to our diet. I reckon that, counting the Licence Fee, Bait, Tackle, and transport to the River Okement, each ounce of fish worked out at about 49p., or £7.84 a pound. We wandered around the hut circles of Pre-Historic Man, borrowing one of their stone kitchen tables one sunny afternoon for our picnic. More than once we were near to losing our way. However, when I opined that "I would rather be lost with you than found with anyone else", I was met with the sharp rejoinder, "You'd better had!" I do find myself often in this no-win situation - for instance, I bring my dear wife an early morning cup of tea, (after serenading her with a morning hymn executed with two or even more fingers), with the loving greeting, "Hullo, Beauty!", only to field the reply, "Hullo, Beast". Sometimes the truth is kinder not said.

Talking of Beasts, one is reminded of the likeness of a clergyman nowadays to the White Rhino - both are an Endangered Species. When I was ordained some 49 years ago, a pale young curate was regarded as fair game for snipers of every kind. All that has been changed by scarcity. I was told that quite recently the Bench of Bishops issued a Top Secret Memorandum to all dignitaries, (leaked by a mole lent by Mrs Thatcher), recommending that the Inferior Clergy be treated with extreme courtesy, and caution. They have been given the advice Isaac Walton proffered to the Anglers who use live frogs as bait - "Use him as though you loved him, that he may last the longer". It is now a common, though still awesome, spectacle to observe a portly Arch-deacon going on bended knee, to implore a Superannuated Vicar to get annuated again. In fact, this is exactly what has happened to me! Our previous Rector, who had the charge of two other parishes as well, has left and is not being replaced. In the ensuing re-shuffle one parish has gone to Balsham, another to Linton, and Shudy Camps has been left as pig-in-the-middle, - a rather super pig, which has fallen to my lot! I feel like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, (who seems also to have inspired England's opening batsmen), - "he stoppeth one of three". Shudy Camps is a compact little village of just a hundred houses, and some 300 souls. One is reminded of the dictum of an eminent Scottish Divine, that "one soul is Diocese enough for a Bishop". By that reckoning I do the work of 300 Bishops, and carry on my elderly shoulders a whole Lambeth Conference of pastoral concern. Or would be so doing, were it not that my super congregation are "workers together" with me for the Kingdom! It is really most invigorating, more so than ever before. The afore-mentioned Vicar of Linton has been heard to say that his is "the best job in the Church of England". In this he is wrong, but maybe he has the second best. One of the advantages which a retired priest given the care of a little village has over an incumbent with three or four, (which is made possible by the fact that the retired priest already has his livelihood from his pensions), is that he can give his undivided attention. In this instance it means that instead of a service on only two Sunday mornings a month, we can now have a regular time of worship every Sunday morning, and always at the same time! No dodging around with "nine o'clock first Sunday, half past ten second, and three p.m. in the third etc". This sort of thing, alas so common, causes great confusion, and guarantees a dwindling congregation! I say "time of worship", and not "regular Eu-

charist, because I believe that we Christians should not be greedy, but should share the best time on Sunday mornings at least equally with those who have not yet "made up their Christian mind", and who realise, even if the Church does not, that the Holy Communion is not for them. So, we have as our prime occasion each month a Family Service (not Communion!) on the first Sunday, when the Good News is very simply said and sung, and refreshments afterwards, with bags of crisps for the young people. Monster munches are quite popular.

As it comes near to Christmas I am reminded of two poems of the "Before" and "After" kind, from Matthew Arnold and "Q". Here they are:-

Before

"On that hard, Roman world  
Despair, and utter loathing  
fell;  
Deep weariness, and sated  
lust  
Made human life a hell."

After

"God, in His Palace Resident  
Of bliss, beheld earth's sinful ball,  
And charged His own Son, innocent,  
Us to redeem from Adam's Fall.  
'Yet must it be that men Thee slay!'  
'Yea, tho' it must, I must obey!'  
Said Christ, and came, God's Royal Son,  
To die, and dying to atone  
For harlot, thief and publican."

and, we are told on the best authority, for me and you too!

Wishing you the true joy of Christmas,

from

*No - Don*

P.S. The "New Testament Word Finder", which many of our friends generously sponsored, enabling it to be sold for the very reasonable sum of £2.00, is still in steady demand, and over 2,000 copies have been distributed. I have just had the proofs of "Read Mark, and Learn", daily notes for the year covering St. Mark's Gospel, and based on the theory that daily Bible readings should be extremely short. If you would like a copy, we should be delighted to send you one, or more, as a New Year's gift.

Glossary of Terms

'portly Archdeacon' - 'one who conducts himself with dignity and with port'.  
example - 'that man is portable', i.e. suitable for  
portly office. See PORTWHOLE, PORTWHOLINESS, PORTITUDE.