

Foreword – an exercise in creative writing and gentle satire around the fictional city of Pychester, to comment on the state of the CofE and maybe give you a smile.

This story follows on from “A Pychester Christmas Carol”, which can be found on our website as http://www.stmichaelsmountdinham.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/A_Pychester_Christmas_orig.pdf

A Pychester Spring.

Welcome back to the fictional city of Pychester, founded by the Romans as they pressed westward, across what would be come King Alfred's & Hardy's Wessex as far as the River Pyke, leaving their Baths, Praetorium, Walls, Roads, the Via XXX back to Stonehenge and Londinium, and the Via XXXVIII to Weston-super-Mare and Glevum, and a sapling Christian Church to grow and change the old beliefs of the Celts.

That Church evolved, extended, flourished, ossified, reformed, rebelled, established, dozed, enhanced, served, educated, annoyed, diversified, protested, placated, in short was incarnate like her Lord in a beautiful corner of a messy world. In 2016, on the final evening of April, most of this diverse church in Pychester, well those that I kind of know a little about, will gather together on Mount Dinham, in the slightly faded Victorian splendour of the Church of St Pythagoras & All Angles to witness and welcome the Installation of its new Priest(s).

But first we must catch up on events over the previous few months – Springtime in Pychester. You will recall how baby Carol was born in St Pythag's Choir Vestry right after Midnight Mass at Christmas. A few days later her family and friends gathered cooingly in the Cotswolds for New Year at Harold's parents' place with Lizzie their Curate from London. Little Carol worked an early miracle by restoring godly order to her grandparents' marriages, to what extent we won't enquire, but grandmaternal feelings sent Annabel back to Richard and Thomas home to Christina. (I hope I've got that the right way round – not advocating swinging!)

Back at Wave, Sun & Wind in North Devon, HR worked a little creative linguistics and Jo was allowed her “paternity leave”. She & Mary are like any other doting parents, exhausted, muddling through. Jo feels perhaps more excluded than most partners at not being able to breastfeed baby Carol, but otherwise all is fine.

And so, back to Pychester. Following the Anglican Primates' Gathering at Canterbury in mid-January, Colin and Reginald, the gay men on Decani in Pychester Cathedral Choir, known colloquially as Col.Reg, were noticed by the Dean to be singing “a light to lighten the Genitals” during Nuncs Dimittitis. Despite, or perhaps because, of his strict evangelical upbringing, the Dean found himself smiling inwardly, but for the sake of the common good there had to be “consequences” and words were had.

Shortly thereafter the Precentor's spellchecker started misbehaving and the February Music List had a few embarrassing typos – Panis Angelicus became rather too cherub-like, pieces by Viadana were definitely not going to droop in pitch, while Tantrum ergo and Ecce sacerdos magus did not impress the Bishop. I vow to leave the country, Pride on in majesty, ...the list could go on.

Candlemas came and went at St Pythag's, the Peregrine Falcons sacrificed a couple of feral pigeons, old Simeon and Anna, fans of Jane Asher, got ready, but with the Church of England failing to authorise a Service for the Churching of Lesbians, Jo and Mary stayed away.

The multifaceted jewel that is St Pythagoras & All Angles, congregation, choir, occasional visitors, churchwardens, servers, was holding together well during the Interregnum after Fr Jonathan had retired again at Epiphany, welcoming a variety of well-chosen locum priests. But already in mid-

February, Bishop Rick and Archdeacon Idris were making an offer down at the Quay at the carelessly named Blue Anchor Inn that the Churchwardens couldn't refuse.

"What's your website say? Traditional Church for Today – time to show it, chaps. We've got a lovely clergy couple looking to relocate out of London with their children. As you will have noticed, Bishop Rick has been building one of his '50 Sheds of Pray' down by the River Pyke, between the Allotments and that new housing estate, Jurassic Park, where the diggersaurs tore up the grass and trees and deposited neatly spaced 3&4-bed homes. Well, now it's fini-Shed."

"Just so, Idris. Of course, St Simon Says wanted to do the Church Plant, but it's in your Parish; your big chance to man up for the Gospel and diversity. Don't panic! Fr Helen knows the score; she'll do Earthy Churchy at the Shed down by the riverside; got a smile to flutter a thousand sails; you will support her, I'm sure. And Fr Basil will look after all the priestly stuff you like up at St Pythag's... unless you want... No, okay. Well, Thomas doubted at first, but he got over it, experience – touch and go, I always say – in a positive, safeguarded sort of way. Wonderful!"

"So, Fulge, Jesu fulge, as we say. The Archdeacon will effect the paperwork. See you for the Installations. I'll expect an "Ecce sacerdos magnus" from your choir, always enjoy your bunfights. Must dash, train to London, General Synod, don't you know. Ciao!"

The following week St Pythag's website risked the Bishop's ire with some humorous comments targeted at General Synod's decision to snub and upset the Scottish Episcopal Church by approving a bipartite agreement, The Columba Declaration, with the presbyterian Church of Scotland.

"Ferret Presto came from Chesto with a cool disdain,
He stepped on the Piscies because they were frisky,
But @Synod now shares in the shame."

"John Knox and Samuel Seabury look down from Heaven on the General Synod and agree, Flippin' Sassenachs! Where's Jenny Geddes when you need her?"

"Paraphrasing the Prime Minister in 'Love Actually' – I love that word 'Declaration'. Covers all manner of sins, doesn't it? I fear that this has become a ColumBADeclaration. Based on the English Bishop & Synod taking exactly what they want and casually ignoring all those things that really matter to the Scottish Episcopal Church. We may be a small church but we're a great one. The church of St Andrew and St Ninian, Ss Mary, Mungo & Midge, the Epiclesis, Samuel Seabury, Old St Paul's, Richard Holloway, @thurible, ..."

And so to March; it's Spring, Jim, but not as we know it, though the mythical hybrid of Lion and Lamb, fierce icy roar, then all warm & cuddly, is not unusual. What would in former times have been called the St Chad's Day squall line was named Storm Jake, and rolled across the county like a Dementor sucking coldly at coats and hats and inside-out umbrellas; even the hale and hearty cowering from its power as hail and sleet hit the windows and whitened the gutters.

But soon, out in the green meadows of Nether Pyke, the newly born lambs were gambling and seemed to be winning in the lottery of life, as a loving God continued loading the dice slightly in favour of beauty and joy.

At Passiontide, the magnolias stood like burning bushes by St Sidwella's Almhouses and Mr Rusty's well-gardened roundabout, their upright candle petals like cups to be drunk deeply from by our Saviour as he passed this way to the green sward outside the Cathedral West Front within the city wall, to be re-crucified in Good Friday's ecumenical Walk of Witness.

The good people of Nitcombe Regis had been shocked when their house-for duty Priest, retired Prebendary what-was-his-name, was taken away to do prison duty, and not as a chaplain; the Church finally safeguarding the vulnerable rather than the venerable.

So they were more than pleased to learn that the Georgian Parsonage had been let out for a couple

of weeks to a group of Londoners, on the condition that one of them, who happened to be a priest, albeit of the lady variety, would provide some Holy Week and Easter services for them.

Fr Lizzie from St Anna's in London mugged up on BCP, pinned up her hair discretely, and pitched her homilies as engaging but not too challenging questions as to what the biblical characters of the Passion story did with the rest of their lives.

And the children, for there were some holidaying with grandparents and who couldn't escape, made a time-line of different types of people, Jew, Gentile, poor, rich, Roman, African, Celtic, married, celibate, married, missionary, indigenous, female, being accepted as priests and bishops. They even optimistically projected into the future when their Bishop might be (whisper who dares) gay (2020), or a wheelchair user (2025), or 'on the spectrum' (2030).

Thus it was that Lizzie & Harry, Dick & Annabel, Tom & Christina from St Anna's, and Jo, Mary & baby Carol, plus Gabriel on special leave from Salisbury, were swelling the congregation and choir of St Pythag's for the Easter Vigil (too exotic for Nitcombe Regis though Lizzie had offered). And so aged 3 months little Carol was being baptised into the fellowship of Christ's body the Church on this most auspicious Saturday night; as in the Early Church, amidst Readings, new Fire, Paschal Candles, Processions, well-chanted Exultet, Incense, Water, Chrism Oils, Renewal of Baptismal Vows and serious Promises, Signs outward and visible of an inward and spiritual Grace.

The extra ceremony, the Whitacre Lux Aurumque, Bach O Little One Sweet, pushed it all to a full 2 hours, with Carol taking her refreshment unobtrusively well before the champagne corks were popping, unaware and unworried that 2 mums and a godfather/dad was anything unusual.

It's been a Bendicite April, as described in the Song of the Three in the fiery furnace, which the Greek Septuagint added to the Book of Daniel;

O ye Showers and Dew, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Winds of God, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Fire and Heat, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Dews and Frosts, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Frost and Cold, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Ice and Snow, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Lightnings and Clouds, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O all ye Green Things upon the Earth, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O all ye Fowls of the Air, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Priests of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O ye Servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

O Ananias, Azarias and Misael, bless ye the Lord : praise him, and magnify him for ever.

Winter had one last bite at the cherry blossom and a fluffy duvet of snow settled on the high Tors of Pykemoor, but unlike some Springs, the tragic Arab one, or the effervescent New Wine Spring that the Archbishop of Canterbury wants to unleash, the sap of Nature's bounty is rising too high and too fast to be quenched by a few cold showers. Cute fluffy chicks of our urban Peregrines are popping out of their eggs at St Pythag's and on cathedrals and high churches all over the land, playing to their devoted audiences through their webcams.

The last day of April, the Eve of Rogation Sunday brings a gentler, warmer afternoon. The choir has finished practising and the pre-Service organ music is broadcasting to Mount Dinham through the wide open west doors, as clergy and people assemble for the Installation of Frs Basil & Helen to serve, in well-defined capacities and categories, the Parish of St Pythagoras & All Angles, and Little St Pythag's Mission Shed...

But that, dear Reader, is a story for another day. Richard Barnes – this version Sat 2 July 2016.