

Foreword – an exercise in creative writing and gentle satire based around the fictional city of Pychester. My sideways look at the CofE to give you a smile and maybe make you think. Views are not necessarily mine, and certainly not endorsed by the Church of St Michael & All Angels.

A Pychester Installation, Pride & Pentecost.

The last day of April 2016, the Eve of Rogation Sunday brings a gentler, warmer afternoon to Pychester. 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 from the city and farther afield 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 down by the riverside.

Revd Trevor de la Gruyère spikes up his hair as he crosses the unmarked border between posh St Simon's and the inner city. He prefers to be known as Trev the Rev, but don't scoff, his youth church "Unleashed" in the medieval St Jeffrey Arches is going from strength to strength among those who need or like to do church in an unchurched sort of fashion, ideally situated also to minister to the nightclub area of the city, and host the midnight prayer support wing of the Street Pastors.

Those who are predestined to know will know about the Charismatic Calvinist congregation meeting somewhere in Pychester. Pastor Fred Klein and a few of the saved have come with their inhalers and a gift of tulips. In June their Punk-Worship band, "Total Depravity," will ramp things up at the big youth event "ShedLoad" that Trev the Rev is organising in the Cathedral for those who like I mean just kind of so don't do church, y'know. Apparently "ShedLoad" will have live bands, skate park, big screen gaming, sumo wrestling, giant inflatables, pamper zone and prayer!

Meeting in the Community Centre just across the Iron Bridge, the Scandinavian-Lutherans of the Pychester Knitwear Church have brought a hand-made warm woollen chasuble and embroidered stole for Fr Helen to use down at her Shed of Prayer. They're chatting with progressive church members from the URC, whose Minister is already up in the Choir Stalls getting ready to sing.

And there with them is Revd Prof Gregor Macrina, who lectures in Scottish Studies at Pychester University; he's started a Church of Scotland outpost under the Columba Declaration at St Giles Without, or should that be 'outwith'. The Evangelical Bookshop that had been at St Giles' for years had closed now that everyone accessed their Scriptures and Commentaries online, so it was either a Fresh Expression of Kirk or conversion to yet more student flats.

From the Cathedral Dean Arius, Canon Flora Pebbles, Toni Peregrinus the Precentor and the Conan Barbarian have all turned out. The Dean will look the part, resplendent in the Procession, as the Tapisers have allowed him to wear their heavily symbolic "Tree of Life" Cope. He hopes Bishop Rick and Archdeacon Idris will make an effort to look suitably ceremonial, but has his doubts.

To be sure, there's Fr Benny Dicite from Our Lady and St John, and the Civic Dignitaries who this year seem to have a special devotion to our Lady of Perpetual Roadworks. The local MP and his partner smile and stride up the nave to their reserved seats.

Speaking in many tongues, members of the Orthodox Church, who sing their Vigils and Liturgies in the old Chapel of St Sidwella, are ostensibly more united than most denominations, but starting to be concerned how many of their 14 autocephalous Churches will turn up to the forthcoming Holy & Great Council of the Orthodox Church to be held in Crete – it's been 1200 years since the previous Council, so it would be a shame for some to boycott it.

The Sage Methodists and the local Baptists are ecumenically minded too these days and have come to check on the quality of Anglican Hymn-singing and Refreshments. Even the Vicar of St Simon Says and his Puritan-leaning, born-again Anglicans have risked the smells & bells and the possibility of Latin to pray that the Bishop's message might touch the hearts of many who are there.

The inspirational leaders of BeauJesus Nouveau are somewhat subdued. Someone has got a bit too biblical in their traditional marriage and been discipling where they ought not to have been. The word concubine has been heard in the land, but they're confident God forgives a bit of good honest heterosexual unfaithfulness; whereas those wicked "same-sex attracted" clergy with their faithful partners deserve hell-fire and ...

The successful folk from Big Harvest are confused by the strange table with candles and a crucifix on it, where the overhead video screen and the mikes for the worship band ought to be. And how are those singers going to be heard unamplified in such a large building? Traditional church buildings may cost a pretty penny to maintain, but their builders knew what they were doing in terms of sound projection and visible liturgy. Meanwhile the Chaplains to the Hospital and Hospice sit near the back in case one is called away urgently.

And there are children, teenagers even, alighting from the coach bringing the supportive and the inquisitive from Frs Basil & Helen Maudsley's previous parish in London. Their millennium baby twins are among them, having just turned 16. Mildred (universally known as Millie – why the heck did you call me Mildew – parents!) and Michael (known as Mikey in solidarity with his sister) are staying in London with friends for their GCSEs, but they are here to moan and make demands if they have to move to this Trollopian backwater.

Millie zips up the temporary ramp in her wheelchair, but the loo's not accessible, she'll have to take Communion with the second sitting down in the Nave for those oldies who can't do the steps any more, and singing in the Choir's gonna be tricky.

"It's like the well-resourced London Hospitals compared to the rest of the NHS," her father explains calmly, "London Diocese has people with an excess of wealth, with Dragons' Den motivation and penitential giving that gets things done. Folk here aren't any less caring, they just have less resources, but we'll get these things sorted, with or without Faculties. The Church thinks having a dozen female bishops means equality is done and dusted. Synod'll spend days on Tissues in Sexuality, and maybe one hour on Christians with disability or mental illness. Most of the bishops can't get their pointy heads around any theology of diversity, but things will change."

Too right, thought Mikey, we'll need a branch of WhiCh (Wheelchairs in Church) here in Pychester for starters. Mum says the Shed had some decent technology, at least. Reckon I'll hang out down there with the flower-people and the tree-huggers.

But all of them, in their variety and diversity, are suddenly united in prayer, purpose and liturgy as the choir belts out the opening fanfare of Bruckner's *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus*, with the trio of trombones in the West Gallery causing many to turn round as the Clergy Procession enters through the great west doors. Time honoured Christian choreography at its best – fit for purpose.

I won't bore you with the details of the Service of Installation, but Bishop Rick's Sermon gave a fascinating insight into the unusual dedication of the Church of St Pythagoras & All Angles, based on the Life of St Pythagoras recorded in the famous Anglo-Saxon Pychester Book in the Cathedral's Chained Library. The "Vita Sancti Pythagoris" is now published separately on St Pythag's website.

Those with the relevant musical knowledge were worried when they saw that the Mass Setting was "Mass in B minor by J S Bach", but being St Pythag's this was the B minor Mass, Johann, but not as you knew it. The reduced B minor *Missa Brevis* edited for Liturgical Use at St Pythag's takes all the great tunes that you know and love, but skips all that difficult development and recapitulation, and the Credo (sorry), to get it down to 12 minutes or 20 with the Gloria.

Rogation Sunday and the weather angels are on the side of Frs Basil & Helen. After High Mass at St Pythag's, choir & congregation visit Mt Dinhan and bless it, incensing some of the residents, and process on down, singing as they go, to the riverside allotments to meet up with Fr Helen's little crew at Earthy Churchy. And it's amazing what some nearly scriptural smoked salmon sandwiches and prosecco, and rather less biblical sausage rolls and lemon-drizzle cake, can do to smooth over

one's theological differences. A promising start, everyone agrees.

Our story moves on to a Saturday morning in May, and, looking across from his bedroom to the Rose Window of St Pythag's Church, old Peregrine Stoop is feeling his age, and the bits of his body that seem to be ageing the most, the muffin-top waistline, the burgeoning man-baps. Was he transitioning? No, that's what tree-hugging towns like Totnes did. Be sensible, he was more Danish pastry than Danish Girl. Nevertheless, it is a day to get up and go, first to the Pride Matins in St Pythag's, and then to join in solidarity with the younger in heart and sole on the Pride March – with or without allocating a letter of the alphabet to himself.

Looking out that fine May morning all seemed clearer, closer, the villages, hills and moors,
The flocks and pastures, smooth-flowing river and cataract,
And trees short and tall with sap rising, newly bursting into leaf.
The May Queens and their acolytes in all their diversities
Adorning our worship and walking with Pride for the Incarnate God,
Exploring the Gospel message of fullness, abundance, overflowing love.

This month of Mary, flower bedecked statues hiding the confusions of her human life.
As the Annunciation took hold, how to love faithful Joseph?
Caring for and cared for by young John in their bitter bereftness;
Post-Ascension, what will the disciples expect her to be or to say?
Love in its manifold forms is the godly Way. not dry doctrine but practice and process,
Faithfully carrying our crosses and kisses of love and hurt.
The cross that says you got it wrong, accept forgiveness, try again.
The kiss that says I love you still, receive abundance, let love reign.

Pentecost Sunday, 10 o'clock on the dot, a live PyTV broadcast from Pychester Cathedral, welcome from the smiling Dean, then 5 whole minutes of Organ crescendo, architectural camera-fest, precision Processing, vibrant Vestments, pull out the Trompette stop and launch into “Come Down O Love Divine”. That's the way to do Liturgy, religious Game of Thrones, comfort and escapism in times of austerity. But the Lambeth Bubble knows nothing of Faith in the Shires, nor of Faith in the Northern Cities. The Archbishop prays for the Spirit to disturb us, and late in June there will be an unexpected and unwanted answer to some people's prayers!

Pentecost evening, moved by the Spirit, Fr Basil makes the short pilgrimage up to the Cathedral to represent St Pythag's as part of our Archbishops' great Wave of Prayer, #ThyKingdomCome, as it ripples gently into Pychester. With their resources and experience from “Sacred Grounds”, Canon Flora and her team know how to make a good job of this sort of alternative worship event. Spotting the big screen he finds a seat near the front, but font size, sound & projection are all good.

In contrast to Beacon Events elsewhere, there is no big name Speakers, just a sensitive welcome and blessing from Bishop Rick, no over-amplified music group, but the University Chapel Choir singing traditional and Taize with occasional obbligate woodwind – cool.

The 4-minute multi-media meditation on “Breath” is very effective. Isn't it really interesting how many words can be made from the 6 letters of “Breath”, earth, heat, heart, beat, bathe, ..., over 50 in all. The imagery of the Intercessions, fire, floodtide, lifegiver, is vivid but sensitive given recent natural and man-made disasters.

Then comes half-an-hour using the experimental prayer spaces created around the vast and beautiful Cathedral. All rather Celtic or “Beaker Folk” with plenty of tea-lights, fairy-lights, post-it notes, fish to cut out and net, salt, bricks and pebbles. Some of the side chapels used are still not wheelchair accessible, Fr Basil notes. Outside the Dean is incensing those who tread the labyrinth.

They gather again for a recorded message from the Archbishop of Canterbury encouraging them to use the Lord's Prayer more deeply as a spur to evangelism. Many faithful people still find Justin

Welby a difficult person to warm to. His Christian journey, which he tends to emphasize; his messy, unbelieving childhood, sudden conversion, blessed abundant adult life, is rather the opposite to theirs; blessed, Christian upbringing, evolving commitment, messy faith and adulthood, sometimes feeling short-changed by God, but persevering. Both these and other journeys can be equally true; the Church so needs to change its obsession with binary judgementalism, and recognise the richness of diversity.

Moving gently through Compline, Fr Basil checks which version of the Lord's Prayer is on the screen (one of the dafter changes of liturgical revisionism he has always thought) and they pray it together a little more carefully than usual, agree with neighbours that it has been a wonderful evening of renewal, and go out hoping that the loving Spirit of the living God might break, melt, mould and fill them, and more of His peace and purpose might settle on the people of Pyfordshire.

One month later, Saturday 11th June, and it's Fr Helen, Millie & Mikey who are up at the Cathedral, tweeting - So Excited! Looking forward to great evening at Pychester Cathedral with ShedLoad.

“ShedLoad” is the Youth Event organised by Rev Trev's “Unleashed” Youth Church with twelve hundred kidz of all ages getting their eardrums blown away surrounded by a millennium of heritage and memorials to loads of ancient Christian guys – like why were there so few Christian women in the olden days?

First up is the group all the middle aged male youth workers have come to see, sorry, hear, “Willow Herb”, nice girls, great set of legs, sorry, acoustic ballads - the sort of Folk Religion that evangelicals do approve of. Rapping himself around the pillars of the cathedral and getting everyone to pogo fit to make the earth move is “HopeKid”, whose antics in local schools the previous week, disturbing and annoying students sitting their GCSEs, have nevertheless brought in a goodly number.

Not stereotyping, but the “Pamper Zone” for girls only of course, in this straight down the line Gospel evening, is located in the relative peace and quiet of the Lady Chapel. A cardboard cut-out of Her Majesty the Queen watches from the Pulpit (I kid you not) as the decibels ramp up and the evening goes ecumenical with “Total Depravity,” the local Calvinist Punk Worship Band. Catholic balance is restored by the “Extreme Servers”, juggling lit candles, moist aspergilia, and outdoing the dry-ice machine with a display of synchronised thurible swinging.

Dean Arius and Canon Flora Pebbles get tweeting their selfies down with the kids, and remarkably the whole Cathedral is returned to normal services by Sunday morning. A shed load of work, but undoubtedly successful and meeting a different need in a different way.

Fr Helen, Mikey & Millie will need to see what might be adapted to give Earthy Churchy, or Mossy Church as it is now officially known, some youth appeal, once they can hear themselves think.

Richard Barnes – this version Monday 1 August 2016.

