

Poems of Spring 2016

St David's Day.

Daffodils, dragons and leeks, rain and Welsh cakes,
Happy St David's Day, ancient Land of our Fathers.

Memories come flooding back,
Of visits to the tiny city of St Davids,
Beyond the M4, A40, past post-card Solva, over hill and vale,
Bright jewel on the index finger of Pembrokeshire.

Grand medieval Bishop's Palace
Now ruined by time and tide of human greed.
Your humble, wonky Cathedral still growing from the ground
In its fertile green valley 'twixt land and sea.
Singing in the nave sloping from earth towards heaven,
Myth and mist and mystery rolling in from the Celtic Sea,
A thin place welcoming pilgrims old and new.

Dewi Sant, son of St Non, not knowing your father,
You became father and bishop to folk regrouping
At the end of Empire, gathering monks and preachers
To praise God and serve the people.
Patron, now smiling across the bridge of time
As your nation's Anthem gathers the faithful.

Long ago on an Eastern shore, hyfryd cariad Rhian told me
That it was hard to worship God in an unfamiliar tongue.
Renewers and Reformers remember please that language and images
Of the Incarnate need time and space to become embodied.

And now, in Exeter, St David's Church,
Its sacred stones scarily shifting towards the sunset,
Seeks a stable foundation for transformation
To re-embrace community with warm open welcome.

Richard Barnes – Tue 1 Mar 2016



St Chad's Day – 2nd March.

It's Spring, Jim, but not as we know it,
Though this mythical hybrid of Lion and Lamb,
warm and cuddly with fierce icy roar,
Is not unusual in the month of March.
What would, in former times, have been St Chad's Day squall line
Is now Storm Jake rolling across us like a Dementor
Sucking coldly at coat and cap and inside out umbrella.
Even the hale and hearty cower from its power
As hail and sleet hit the windows and whiten the gutters.

And The Lee Shore by Thomas Hood (1789-1845) set to music by Samuel Coleridge Taylor (1875-1912) comes to mind:

Sleet! and hail! and thunder! And ye winds that rave,
Till the sands there under Tinge the sullen wave --

Winds, that like a demon Howl with horrid note
Round the toiling seaman, In his tossing boat --

From his humble dwelling On the shingly shore,
Where the billows swelling Keep such hollow roar --

From that weeping woman, Seeking with her cries
Succour superhuman From the frowning skies --

From the urchin pining For his father's knee --
From the lattice shining, Drive him out to sea!

Let broad leagues dissever Him from yonder foam; --
O, God! to think man ever Comes too near his home!

The Joy of Evensong – Mothering Sunday

We're wearing our hoodies for Choral Evensong
Letting them drape down our backs like slightly parted lips.
Improper thoughts of the Propers this morning.
Being glad, all that love her, rejoice that ye may suck,
And be satisfied with the breasts of her consolation.
I was glad; we will go in; peace be within; plenteousness; thither go up.

Laetare and the Curate is pretty in pink for the Angelus.
Hail Mary, full of grace, gratia plena, hand made for the Lord.
Psalm 30, Coverdale of course, so BCP, so English, with its major-minor chants,
But basically a take on Luther's strong German translation of the Hebrew.
Product of that earlier European project, the Reformation.
And England is still undecided.

Singen praises unto the Lord, O ye saints of his;
For his wrath endureth but the twinkling of an eye, und in his pleasure is life.
Thou hast put off mein sackcloth, und girded me with gladness;
O mein Gott, I will give thanks unto thee for ever.

Costume change and he's in red and silver, coping splendidly
With Old and New Testament, and Four Collects in Lent,
While we gaily trip our way through Tallis's Dorian moments.
Enjoy the false relation while you may.
In Lindchester Freddie's getting a stiff lecture from his Dorian mentor. *
Purcell's passionate orgy of eight intertwining voices reaches its climax,
Pleading, "Hear my prayer O Lord and let my crying come unto thee."

Another costume change for the golden moments of Benediction,
Meditating on the Blessed Trinity united in Christ
In the most holy sacrament of the Altar; though it is night.
Panis angelicus, tre panini in uno panino, perhaps,
After our Roman Mass this morning at St Mike's Transponteferro,
Tonight it's the Catholic full house, Immaculate Conception, Glorious Assumption,
Spouse most chaste – Poor old Joseph, life ain't going well.

Are the Candles getting taller each week now,
Or is that another figleaf of my naughty imagination?
In this strange inversion of my adolescence,
Old age is losing the raging hormones but also their suppression.
O Salutaris Hostia, Opening wide the gate of heaven to us below.
With Tantrum Ergo, Thomas Aquinas helps us this great sacrament to revere.
Let us adore, genuflect and process offstage in peace and joy,
The Liturgy of our Mother Church verily performed.
(Psallam spiritu et mente; I will sing with spirit and with understanding.)

Richard Barnes – Mon 7 March 2016 following Mothering Sunday.

* - reference to characters in Catherine Fox's "Realms of Glory" blogged novel.



A Lament for the Sad Demise of the Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway

Lament, O my people, between the Ticket Office and the Footplate,
For the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway is no more;
Has been no more for 50 years, half a century now.
The Beeching Axe was laid to the Branch and it fell
On Sunday 6th March 1966, with a quiet crack and a great roar
From its supporters but to no avail – wail and lament.

Shame on us and on our short-sighted leaders who never learn,
Never see the wider sky, the public need, or even care.
It served the business, agricultural and passenger needs of the two counties.
Now our transport arteries are clogged by lorry and private car.
Preservation societies offer a purposeful life for the happy, geeky few,
But cannot replace the lost networks of joined-up communities.

Of course the loss of a hundred miles of track and a hundred years of history
Cannot be compared to losses of jobs, or lives, or loves scarring our present,
But if we cannot, do not remember, cherish, and grow from the DNA of our heritage
We tend to deny the value, beauty, and worth of the humanity of the other.

So hiss and wheeze and clank and grind
In the mind's eye of my childhood times,
And take me back to the clickety-clack of the wheels on the track
And the smoke from the stack as we speed on past the lineside shack.
But the Mixed Goods, Milk Train and the Pines Express are no more.

Its stations a poem in themselves, a litany of Somerset levels and rolling Dorset hills.
Highbridge, Edington Burtle, Cossington, Bawdrip Halt,
Shapwick, Ashcott, Glastonbury & Street,
West Pennard, Pylle, Evercreech Junction,
Templecombe, Stalbridge, Sturminster Newton,
Shillingstone, Durweston Halt and Blandford Forum.
Spettisbury, Broadstone, Poole and Bournemouth West.

Richard Barnes – Mon 7 March 2016.

The Wheelchair of Witness – Good Friday

While St David's Kids make their Easter Garden

And St Mike's sings Reproaches, Τρισάγιον and Venerates the Crux Fidelis,

Wheelchair and I go ecumenical with the full house at Exeter Cathedral,

Where hands-on welcomers are out in force, not asking permission to touch,

So the hypersensory, neurodiverse must brave the well-meaning crowd

Of hand-shakers and asymmetric shoulder patters.

The Passion in an engaging modern translation well-read,

The Sermon a fresh audio-clip take on the standard evangelical,

Friendly Intro, Disarming Humour, Emotional Blackmail, Commitment Required.

The Prayers well-meant but patronising, in that binary sort of way

Where we Christians are all whole and the World is all broken,

Those lesser Christians with disability or depression cause pity or embarrassment,

And the poor and needy and hurting are all out there in the city.

We both agree that the Music was sadly totally naff.

There are so many deeply moving, well-trying, singable Passiontide Hymns

So why inflict Worship Group Songs with mediocre lyrics and boring tunes?

Na-na-na-nah, na-na-na-naah. Jesus you're so beautiful!

On many days, but not today, when we are so brutal, and you're not my boyfriend.

Sorry, but Spring Harvest trying to do Celtic with sunrise coloured in your eyes

And the moonlit night bright with shining planets and galaxies does not compute.

So out we all go to walk or roll behind Jesus on his donkey as our witness

To Exeter High Street, thinking "Glory to God in the High St." in a mild English way.

On this sunny spring morning the dogs are out in force too, well-behaved and friendly,

But man's best friends can also sense that some of us have an instinctive "Cave canem".

And beware a little nip on your ankles if you invade our personal wheel-space.

Jesus may be on the High Street, but he doesn't quite make it to Princesshay Square;

We wait there somewhat deflated till the Sally Army Band strikes up a proper hymn.

There is a Green Hill not so far away, outside the Cathedral West Front,

Where our Dear Lord will be crucified again.

The drama is good this year, not an attempt to update, upstage or dumb down the narrative.
A simple al fresco meditation on familiar words from the Bible and the spiritual
Were you There? Were You there? Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
With horrors daily on our news-feeds, it's not the brutality of the crowd or the soldiers,
Nor the expediency of the authorities, Pilate washing his hands of it, that surprises,
But the resolute obedience and gentleness of Christ going to his Cross for us, with us, as us.
Lord of all hopefulness and faithfulness, loneliness and loveliness.
God in Christ paying the price of sin in the broken coinage of costly forgiveness,
And also, perhaps, saying sorry to humanity that in this evolutionary Universe
Loving and growing can only be incarnate with a side order of pain and loss.
A kind of Second Law of Theodynamics is my slightly heretical thought.
But wait, there is a Second Act – the God-man is back
And we touch his robe as he strides past us to amaze his doubting disciples.
But we want no miraculous healing. The world has bigger problems, surely,
And God made us this way to trust and serve him as we are, in all our complexities.

Those who know they are a little damaged come quietly in the shadows of the evening
To St Michael's Transponteferro for the multi-lingual Office of Tenebrae.
The Lassus polyphony of the Hebrew letters, Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Dalek,
Illuminates the musical manuscript of the Cantor's Latin Plainsong.
The Lamentations and darker Psalms, the Responds and Song of Hezekiah,
The strange Readings of the ways of the Ungodly and the need for Blood,
All seem prophetic of this deep night of descent into darkness,
Yet also familiar to those who have known troubled times.
Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in a place of darkness, and in the deep.
And we leave, not in despair, but with a quiet waiting hopefulness
That the faithfulness, loneliness and loveliness of Christ and of his Church
Will spring forth like the hidden grain.

Richard Barnes – Holy Saturday 26 March 2016.

Noli Me Tangere

Noli me tangere. Don't touch me!

Why? Rabboni, Teacher, Lord, Master, Doctor, Gardener, Saviour, Jesus?

Have I become unclean, or are you too pure for me to touch you now?

I, Mary of Magdala, who washed your feet with my tears,

And dried them with my golden hair just a month ago.

Or is your resurrection body still too new, too sensitive,

Regeneration too unfamiliar, too unsteady in this pre-dawn hour?

Another week and Thomas gets the full guided tour, hands, feet, side.

But I have been written out by time, translation, patriarchy.

Your Aramaic was not quite so brusque.

“Mary, you don't need to cling to me, I'll always be with you now.”

And John then wrote it μή μου ἄπτου meaning “stop clinging to me”.

The Latin Church made it “don't touch me” in ascetic St Jerome's Vulgate.

The old story of Roman excesses spawning Puritan repressions even then.

Good for paintings by Fra Angelico et al., or statue by Wynne in Ely,

But not for my reputation.



Today, Easter in Exeter, all our thoughts and touches, clean or unclean,

Sacred or carnal, are purified by your love for humanity in all our waywardness.

Across the city this Passiontide the magnolia candles have been the cups

From which you drink sweet joy or bitter loss as you pass by.

So now, with bushes budding, blossom blushing, branches bearing their first green tints,

With daffodils nodding and lambs gambolling in the lush meadows,

As vibrant voices of men and maidens raise you out of the stillness with dancing emotions,

I will weave a verdant new crown of gentler sprigs and softer colours
To place upon your bloodied head and soothe the rawness of your wounds, my Jesus.

Richard Barnes – Easter Sunday 27 March 2016.

And Mary replied, “Ravioli”, which means Pasta. Jesus said, “Don't tango with me.”

Easter Monday – After Storm Katie

Mares' tails swish the sky clean from last night's Easter storm.
Great swathes of baptismal water cover the fields and corral the ewes to higher ground.
Bright sheets of water that would in Dickensian, Prayer Book days
Have been vast ice rinks twirling with muffled skaters.

Cotton wool clouds rise to wipe the dreamy from the sleepless eyes
Of those so excited, so amazed by the events, so divine, of the past Holy Week.
In the garden, as nesting birds twitter their dawn song,
Sunshine warms the faces and dries the tears,
And a gentler wind ruffles the flowing hair, of his most intimate followers.

Men in white raiment have dropped their script to roll the song away -
Blessed is he who came in the name of the Lord. Blessed!
Girls have risen out of the stillness
And cannot help but laugh and dance before the Lord and sing Alleluia!

Singing in sixth century words of Venantius Fortunatus, *Salve festa dies*,
In a ten-fold multiverse paean of praise, themes that could have come from Iona.
Lo, the fair beauty of earth, from the death of the winter arising,
Every good gift of the year now with its Master returns.

*Hail thee, festival day! Blest day that art hallowed forever;
Day wherein Christ arose, breaking the kingdom of death.*

Richard Barnes – Easter Monday 28 March 2016, 0824 Exeter St David to Bristol Temple Meads.

Northernhay Gardens

Taking the scenic route from Boots to Queen Street through Northernhay Gardens,
With its banks of daffodils and carpets of primroses,
And magnolia cups battered by the storm but unbowed.
The grand statues of worthy men stand guard,
While spire, pylon and crane pierce the western skyline.

But today it's the pointing hand of Peace holding an olive branch
Atop the Exeter War Memorial that commands my attention.
The 4 representatives, 3 men and a woman sit and stare resolutely
Past the horrors of war to the far horizons of hope.
Soldier, sailor, nurse and P.O.W. at their cardinal points since 1923.



John Angel was the sculptor, and on closer inspection
The high figure thrusting her bosom heavenward is Victory eight foot tall,
Holding laurel leaves aloft while treading down the Dragon of tyranny and evil,
The sword of justice at her side, standing there on twenty foot of Dartmoor granite,
Lest we forget that peace for selfish humankind comes with a price.

Today's youth enjoy the sunny grassy slope by old John Dinham,
And I make my quiet way past our colourful little Balamory.
Then sixteen steps and one step more onto the Iron Bridge
With its Narnia steelamps, turn left, hear the organ playing, and home for tea.

Richard Barnes – Sat 2 Apr 2016, Northernhay Gardens.

19240 Shrouds of the Somme – Fri 1 July 2016.



Cathedrals Express – Exeter to Edinburgh – 4/4/16

Exeter Cathedral's twin Norman towers are glimpsed by those arriving from Plymouth,
But it's Pycchester's St Pythagoras & All Angles, prominent on Mount Dinham,
Which you know as St Michael & All Angels Church, that draws their attention.
From Exeter St David's, Taunton is about as close as we get to Bath & Wells
Or ancient New Age Glastonbury across the Somerset Levels.

Bristol Cathedral's strong tower is well seen from the line if you know where to look,
Though others will admire St Mary Redcliffe or Temple Meads itself.
Historic Gloucester, Roman camp and wealthy medieval port, proud Cathedral city,
Indeed my first Cathedral and home of my burgeoning teenage faith,
As I wandered lonely around the Hogwarts' Cloisters, reading stories in stained glass.
Its glorious tower is clear to see, but by-passed these days, slightly down at heel,
Since Georgian aches and pains pumped their money into Cheltenham Spa.
Elgar's Malvern Hills attract my gaze as Worcester's ancient diocese is traversed,
But Magna Carta King John's resting place is not seen.

Birmingham's Cathedrals are out of sight but I know they are there.
Its old churches, temples and columns stand forlorn
Amid a hotch-potch of coloured Lego tower blocks.
Old St Jude's is gone, but 50 years on HTB has planted a new vine
Where the young of all ages pogo to their loud penitential worship songs.
From Grand Junction we descend through our own fumes to the Hades
Of Birmingham New Street station; Grand Central shopping above but still grim below.
Back out the way we came, to Tamworth, its four spirettes about as close as we get to
Three-spired Lichfield, inspirer of naughty but niche Lindchester.
Nor is famous Leicester City, of Richard III and failed Elizabethan love, on our route.
So it's on to Derby, its elegant cathedral with peregrine falcons, not quite visible from the line.
Chesterfield has no cathedra but its landmark twisted spire is a fine view from the train.

At Sheffield we cut through a valley of greening trees; the cathedral again out of sight.
Wakefield Westgate's still got its Cathedral though the Diocese was reluctantly joined
With Ripon and Bradford into the super-Diocese of West Yorkshire and t'Dales.
Centred on Leeds, which is our next station, it's about to be renamed
Diocese of Leeds (Anglican) with a new Bishop but no Cathedral, whereas

Roman Catholic Leeds already has a Bishop & Cathedral; confused, they will be.

We're well into the Northern Province now, and three-towered York blesses us,
With two millennia of history from Roman fort to National Railway Museum.
Darlington's station itself is as elegant as a cathedral with its fine columns and many aisles.
But Durham is everyone's favourite, picturesque in its strength and weight of learning.
Is this where wisdom is to be found? Though now wearing a crown of scaffolding atop its tower.
The Angel of the North seems to mark another boundary, more in time than in space,
Between the ancient knowledge and the industrial technology of the north.
Newcastle Cathedral above the Tyne, St Nicholas with its crowned tower,
Is a modest but elegant sight, and as we depart northwards a special alignment
Of a roof-line 3-4-5 triangle with the tower creates a true Pythagorean moment.

If the weather were kinder we may catch a glimpse of the Holy Island Lindisfarne,
Then awa' to Berwick-upon-Tweed with a prayer of apology to the Piscies
For the Columba Declaration authorising cross-Border poaching.
(N.B. Columba Declaration - The Church of England and Church of Scotland,
as bigger fishes in the ecumenical sea, ignoring the historic rights and wishes
Of our more spiky and liberal siblings in the Scottish Episcopal Church.
As if it really matters when declining numbers have seen the proud land of Ninian,
Columba, Mungo, Mary Queen of Scots, John Knox, Presbyterians, Covenanters,
Jacobites, Wee Frees, Iona, St Giles Cathedral, Old St Paul's,
become a majority non-Christian nation.)

And so we arrive 7 hours 42 minutes and 14 dioceses later, into Edinburgh Waverley,
Bustling Areopagus of this Athens of the North with its three Cathedrals;
St Giles CofS, St Mary's RC, and George Gilbert Scott's three-spired St Mary's Episcopal
Dominating the West End of Edinburgh's New Town,
Built on the faith and funds of two wealthy little old ladies, the Misses Walker,
And proclaiming Christian welcome to all, establishment or fringe.

Richard Barnes – Mon 4 April 2016 – 0924 Cross-Country Exeter to 1706 Edinburgh.

Celts Exhibition at Museum of Scotland.

Celtic connections across northern Europe, from Hibernia to Thracia.

Contrast with Mediterranean Greeks, Etruscan & Romans.

Celtic art, thought & religion were symbolic, whereas Classical world was naturalistic.

Our written view of their Celtic world is only from that classical viewpoint.

Artefacts and archaeology are giving a more complex picture.

Three Highlights, like the iconic triskeles.

Chariot – whose performance depends on the amount of torcs)<;-)>>

Gunderstrup Cauldron – multi-cultural pan-tribal silverwork of gods & men

Carnyx, carnyces – could these be Celtic organ pipes long before Cecilia?

Insular fusion of Celtic and Christian in 7th & 8th centuries led to Mission,

Illuminated Gospel manuscripts, high Celtic crosses, travelling reliquaries.

And a millennium later, the Celtic revival – romantic and/or narrowly nationalistic,

Mixing and misunderstanding, researching and reinventing, druids and bards.

Blind Ossian, the Celtic Homer, fictionalised for willing eyes & ears.

But within all, deeply swirling decoration and symbolism, from bright expansive minds.

Richard Barnes – Wed 6 April 2016 – Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

St Mark's Day

St Mark, Evangelist, writer of the earliest Gospel, sparse, sharp as thorns,

Your words well-turned, but of the man we have only glimpses.

On the periphery, watching, noting, not quite sure about himself or Jesus.

Not suited to the rough disciple's life, all that face-to-face witnessing,

Running naked from Gethsemane's angry conflict,

Flight, not fight, on your cowardly lion's golden wings.

But later, still there, complementing bold outspoken Peter,

Writing an action Gospel from his restored memories of that Jesus.

Then gradually finding prayerful spoken words

For your more thoughtful, thought through, faith in Him.

Brief mentions acting with the Apostles, Peter, Barnabas, Paul.

Journeying through words as scribe, companion, preacher, to Egypt,

Chosen as Bishop of Alexandria, that great city of library and learning,

Pastor of growing North African flocks. No more shame, no more running.

Martyred, revered across two thousand Aprils by all Christians,
By Coptic Churches through times of flourishing, persecution, perseverance,
Now so needing our prayers and support.

Translated, in that other sense, your holy relics crossed the sea
Finding refuge in Venice, foundation of the gold domed Basilica di San Marco.
Fulfilling Pax tibi Marce, evangelista meus. Hic requiescet corpus tuum.

Likewise for me, your holy God-sent day in 1974 made such a mark on me,
Not a Damascus Road but a renewed recognition
That I needed and had that faith based in beauty, forgiveness and longing,
And He was giving me St Mark & St Andrew as guides on the way.

The Month of May

Now is the month of Maying when all around are playing,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-lah, fa-la-la-la, la-lah.

The young land grows its bright greeny grass,
The elder land wears a comfortable Tweed jacket,
Its fifty shades of green flecked with dashes
Of yellow rape-seed flower and red-brown earthiness.

This fine May morning all seems clearer, closer,
The villages and estates, the high mounts and moors,
The pastures and flocks, the smooth-flowing river and cataract,
And trees short and tall with sap rising, newly bursting into leaf.

The May Queens and their acolytes of all diversities
Adorn our worship and walk with 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 bereftness;
Post-Ascension, what the disciples expect her to be or say?



Love in its manifold forms is the godly Way.
Not dry doctrine but practice and process,
Faithfully carrying the crosses and kisses of love and hurt.
The cross that says you got it wrong, accept forgiveness, try again.
The cross that says I love you still, receive abundance, let love reign.

Richard Barnes – Sat 7 May 2016 – Exe Valley on the Train.

National Limerick Day

There was a young Saint Athanasius
Who worried about Credal haziness.
Against Arian fault
He said Quicunque Vult,
With theology that's still amazin'us.

A Sonnet for Pentecost 2016

Come down, O Love Divine, indulge these ears of mine
With descant which I composed for our Wedding,
Far away in space and time – Cambridge, April 1993 -
Before some of our lovely soprano line were born.

Tongues of flame-red stained-glass light
Enhance the long lappets of their hair with highlights,
Delighting mine old eyes with most chaste enjoyment.

Sensuous voices intertwine around our romantic Rheinberger,
Melodies rise and fall like the landscape of Liechtenstein,
But, as in his Benedictus, I'm always a bar behind my muses,
With the word or smile of affirmation that says you are beautiful.

If ye love me, keep me company here a little while,
Then may the Spirit bless you with inextinguishable loves
To lighten your hearts and make your joy complete.

Richard Barnes – Sun 15 May 2016.