

Partners in Pym

Dr Clare Coombe and The Rev'd Dr Julie Gittoes

*After-dinner talk presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society
St. Hilda's College, Oxford, 4-6 September 2015*



Julie Gittoes: I've never given an after dinner speech, nor had my friend and colleague Dr Clare Coombe. However, we are both fans of Barbara Pym and when we were invited to give a joint speech at the dinner of the annual Barbara Pym Society conference entitled *Partners in Pym*, we said 'yes' with barely a moment's hesitation. After some re-reading of *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings* we embarked on our task. Why do we find Pym so compelling? What might a classicist and a theologian have to say to a group of academics and fans?

Clare Coombe: Thank you for inviting us to give this year's after dinner speech and thank you for your welcome. We hope that you have enjoyed the dinner and that you all have plenty to drink. It is a pleasure to be here and to share some of our delight in the novels of Barbara Pym with you.

JG: As friends, we have more than a Pym connection. Two women under a certain age; both with doctorates; we both work for the Church of England, specifically in relation to Cathedrals and education; we're both lovers of gin and shoes. And, as we discovered a few years ago, we share an enthusiasm for the novels of Barbara Pym.

CC: Yet, we are different, too. Slightly different ages; born in different parts of the country; she single, I married; she is ordained, I am not; she has a cat, I have rabbits.

JG: As we planned for this evening, we wondered what we – non-experts in Barbara Pym's work – might possibly say on the subject of 'Partners in Pym' that would interest or entertain you. We realized that perhaps the only thing we might be qualified to speak about would be what it is that makes us delight in Pym, and how our own personal circumstances, as young women in the Church, inform our reading and response to her novels. So why would women like us read Barbara Pym?

CC: A very close friend of mine had always spoken very highly of Pym's novels, yet I did not actually read one until, working my way through a list of recommended reading for those wanting to learn more about the Church of England, I encountered, beneath the weighty introductions to theology and ecclesiastical history, a few novels, which included Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* and Pym's *A Glass of Blessings*. Naturally, I leapt upon it, possibly partly in avoidance of some of the other options on the list, and was, of course, rewarded with one of the most honest, witty, and endearing books I have read.

Over the years, I have come back again and again to *A Glass of Blessings*, as well as reading Pym's other novels, and I find something new in it every time. As I have grown older and especially as I have become more involved in the Church, I also find it, in particular, a more and more challenging novel, and, of all the works of Pym's that I have read, it is the one which I find holds up an uncomfortable mirror in front of me, before which I simultaneously joy and sorrow, just a little. Certainly, for me, it is very far from the 'comfortable little world in which [readers] can relax', as A.S. Byatt once claimed!

Pym provides a mirror on the Church of England, and especially the high church Anglicanism that I favour, which remains resonant more than fifty years on, and for those of us working and living within those frameworks today, this explains the continuing appeal of books like *A Glass of Blessings*. However, I also believe that her portrayals of people, and human relationships, are really what make her works both attractive and important for readers in 2015, and not only readers who lived through the 1950s or read the novels 'the first time round', but also for people of our own generation, not because they provide access to an earlier time, or a nostalgic break from a 21st century reality,

but because they contain universal truths about human nature which are as important now as they were then and in the years before that.

JG: I encountered Barbara Pym quite by chance when a member of my book group suggested that we read *Excellent Women*. Within a few lines I was captivated by her style and by the characters themselves. The decades between her writing and my reading collapsed. In fact, preaching on the first Sunday of Lent a couple of years ago was an opportune moment to quote Mrs Bonner saying: ‘A very interesting sermon, but what a lot of talk about sin. I suppose it’s only to be expected at the beginning of Lent, but it’s all so miserable, don’t you think?’. At which point several Pym fans made themselves known - among them Clare & our Canon Precentor.

There were parallels between Mildred’s situation and my own: I was an unmarried woman, over 30, living alone. There are differences too: she’s the child of a vicarage, I’m a plumber’s daughter; she wondered if she’d marry a vicar, I am one.

Since the advent of civil partnerships, the word spinster no longer appears in the calling of banns or marriage certificate; and nor does the word bachelor. Those who’ve never been married are ‘single’. Those relational markers still shape our lives and interactions, explicitly or implicitly. Within the life of the church, the exercise of leadership (a buzz word for ministry perhaps unknown to Pym) is often related to being married; marriage and 2.4 children is sometimes seen as the model for Christian life and discipleship. As a Bishop once said to a Vicar: ‘Don’t worry I was unmarried for the first five years of my ministry.’

As an institution the C of E is facing new challenges: Synods are discussing a reform and renewal agenda; clergy and parishes are encouraged to pursue what our Bishop calls ‘discipleship multiplication’; in the midst of disagreement we seek mutual flourishing – as Archbishop Justin puts it, we need holy grace in an untidy church.

And yet with Ladies Clubs, flower arrangers, jumbles sales, incense, good looking curates and the tea urn, it seems as if little has changed. What I find compelling about Pym’s novels is her perception of the expectations about men and women, lay and ordained in relation to both marriage and singleness. She throws open questions about what it is to belong within community, what it means to live life to the full; she doesn’t shy away from the choices we make, our longing for dignity and purpose. There is the vulnerability, laughter, ordinariness, joy and gritty reality.

CC: From the perspective of the Church and my own life, in particular, the universality and endurance of Pym’s novels, and especially *A Glass of Blessings*, is epitomized by a very particular theme: tea. Or, in fact, food and drink in general! (I wonder, after all, whether we are really all here tonight for the dinner...) I often find that I judge a parish by whether its coffee is filter or instant, fair trade, served in paper or polystyrene, or, better still, replaced by a glass of wine or sherry, and ‘Church tea’, much like the cup that Wilmet tries and quickly puts down, is something that my husband and I classify as a very particular drink, not really related at all to any other sort of tea.

The centrality of such things to the functioning of the Church in this country on a daily basis is, in my experience, very much like in the novels: thus, for the past month our Heads of Departments meetings at work have focused almost exclusively on the new tea and coffee arrangements for staff and volunteers now that our refectory is being run by an external partner, and in a single week, I have had more people visit the Cathedral Library than in my entire time working there, now that they have all been told it is their new station for accessing morning coffee! Again, in my experience, in that peculiarly British way, much pastoral care in the Church still revolves around the provision of tea at the right moment.

At the other end of the spectrum, even (or perhaps especially!) at high church services, there is always a feeling that important events in the Church calendar should be marked as much by the provision of wine and cheese straws as with the correct liturgy and behaviour. The tensions that arise from these dynamics, such as the balance between refraining from meat when fasting and the temptation to replace it with the most sophisticated fish dishes, are, for me, presented in an amusing, tender, and compassionate way by Pym, but one which does not shy away from presenting a genuine critique.

JG: In *Excellent Women* social and relational questions are played out in the structures and patterns of church life. Ritual and seasons offer a particular rhythm to the narrative. In Mildred we have a knowing narrator whose reflections, hopes and disappointments help us think about marriage and singleness; working life and social interactions;

attitudes to church and expectations of clergy; loneliness and concern for others. Mildred's conversations, observations and self-reflection might help us pick up on contemporary resonances.

Growing up in Herefordshire, jumble sales were a regular feature of parish life – a fundraiser, social gathering, a way of passing on cloths, books, bric-a-brac you no longer wanted. As Rocky puts it, 'you'd think churches existed for jumble sales alone'. Pym takes this element of parish life, and uses it to ask a poignant question about aging and mortality; loneliness and isolation. As she picks up discarded photographs still in their frames, Winifred says: 'I think it's *dreadful* when people send their relations to jumble sales... how can they do it?' In a society where increasing numbers of adults report that they feel lonely, feeling unwanted is not limited to the unmarried. Rocky assumes that everyone has someone to turn to. Mildred challenges him: "'Not everybody,'" I said, thinking of the many rejected ones who lived in lonely bed sitting rooms with nobody to talk to them or prepare meals.'

There's a deep pastoral concern at the heart of Pym's novels: what kind of relationships do we establish and what judgements do we make about others? As a priest, I'm also intrigued by the way the church is perceived and engaged with by those on the boundaries. Rocky says 'Why should the Church want to get anywhere?' said Rocky. 'I think it's much more comforting to think of it as staying just where it is.' That notion of comfort takes on a much more tangible expression. As he confronts difficulties in his relationship we get that glimpse of support as Rocky goes to the pub with Julian.

Helena is perhaps sharper and more brutal in her critique. As an anthropologist, as she reflects on the tribes and cultures which are the object of her study, she applauds their virtue regarding them much better than many so-called good people who go to Church. The relationships between male clergy and the women of the parish are the subject of Mildred's consideration, something she has to negotiate for herself despite the judgement of others. They are also the subject of a scathing reproach by Helena: 'All those old women swooning over good-looking curates won't get it anywhere.'

Should the church be trying to get somewhere? The language might be different, but the concerns are the same. Opening any copy of the *Church Times* reveals aspirations for churches to be committed to growth, making disciples, shaped by God. All this is important in building up the Church and seeking God's Kingdom. Good preaching and pastoral care; making room for academics like Everard and the cultivation of virtue as Mildred tries to like him a little more. Pym is honest about the struggles of spiritual life – kneeling, uncomfortably, expecting something that never came; or finding that, as women walking at the head of a group on the way to the abbey, 'even the priests had accepted our leadership. This seemed a solemn and wonderful thing'.

CC: In addition to exploring personal spirituality and gender roles in the Church, I have found that, by returning to my theme of food and drink in *A Glass of Blessings*, we can also consider the theme of class in the novel. This is one which I also find ultimately very challenging, and which raises further questions about how we might make better room in the Church.

Working in a place like St Albans, I am often made acutely aware that the task of someone running adult education and working for the Church is, in both aspects, made far easier because of the St Albans demographic: my ready audience of well-heeled, well-educated, Radio 4 listeners. *A Glass of Blessings* provides, for me, an excellent set of reminders to reflect on the ease with which one might slip into the 'right kind of people' mentality, those whom Wilmet separates into the classes of smoked salmon as opposed to tinned salmon; we are challenged to remember that Fr Bode, with his preference for tinned salmon connected inextricably for Wilmet with his 'slightly common voice' and the fact that he 'had once read the wrong lesson at a carol service', is also the one who provides the best pastoral care for Mary on the death of her mother.

JG: Another challenging, yet compelling, element of Pym's writing is the way in which she draws us into moments of introspection in the lives of her characters. Mildred reveals both vulnerability and defiance when she says: 'I suppose an unmarried woman just over 30, who lives alone and who has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business... I don't know whether spinsters are really more inquisitive than married women, though I believe they are thought to be because of the emptiness of their lives.' Mildred's responses to questions about her marital status are fascinating and inconsistent, which is perhaps refreshingly honest for a heroine: she tells William that Julian 'isn't the kind of person I should want to marry'. Sometimes she imagines herself

married. Elsewhere she says, 'I don't want anyone.' Is it an assertion of independence, a denial of unexpected feelings? Certainly anyone exposed to that sort of teasing and speculation about love is bound to be defensive.

That leads me to themes which I think make Pym's world so intriguing, encouraging and recognizable. It's her concern for choice and dignity; the way in which she opens up the question of what it means to lead a full life. Marriage, making a career, living alone, becoming indispensable to the parish, or indeed the vicar, as an 'excellent woman' even joining a religious community. All these are examined and commented upon as being dreary or unnatural, liberating or fulfilling, or in the case of the Napiers' pattern of life as being disturbed. Mildred ponders all these things as she washes up and as she makes the tea; as she buys lipstick or sips a drink in the pub.

If marriage is a source of blessing or unhappiness amongst many, then Mildred is indeed liberated to reject the unkind moniker of 'chief of the rejected ones' or 'fussy spinster' and find a way of living a full life. Love in its rich variety is part of that tapestry. She talks to Rocky of different sorts of love 'neither weaker nor stronger than the first, perhaps not to be compared at all.'

The most hopeful legacy for me is that if Mildred can step away from being defined as a spinster or a pragmatic vicar's daughter, then I can also have the assurance that being a single vicar isn't the most interesting or defining thing about me either. If she can determine what a full life balancing responsibilities with choices and a sense of assurance or calling, then so can I. Interesting work, incremental shifts in virtue, and incomparable ways of loving: leading a full-life is open-ended and generative.

All that for me, remains to be worked out in the church and in the world: where we are all juggling the demands of family life, marriage and the reality of being single for at least some part of our life. Perhaps the sitcom *Rev* is part of that Pym legacy – the factions, pressures, the relationships and joys; prayer, fundraising, worship and mission. Perhaps we can also add to the list of stereotypes and expectations the issues around being a vicar's husband. Or indeed a vicar, whose husband or wife might be a bishop.

CC: I would also add one further point about why I think a woman like me, or indeed anyone in the modern day, but perhaps those who particularly find themselves juggling the world of church tea with the personal preference for new dresses and gin martinis, would, and should, continue to read books like *A Glass of Blessings*, and what we might learn from them. For, or perhaps because of, the many frustrations of Wilmet's flawed character, it is she, in particular, who brings me back again and again to this novel, for in her I see so much of myself. She, like me, would perhaps have been worrying about what to wear for tonight's talk before worrying about not having written the content!

She is a woman of her time, in a way, or indeed of even earlier, yet, in her, like in many of Pym's characters, I see traits of a very modern woman, with the same frustrations, vanities, egocentricity, grass-is-greener attitude, and unfounded superiority with which many of us struggle, arguably even more so in the 2010s than ever before. And, here, I return again to the connection with the Church of England that, for those of us working for her and worshipping within her, is particularly poignant within this novel. Our vanity, attitude, and superiority continues to divide us from what we are truly called to be, yet they are also, as Pym recognizes and portrays so compellingly in her novels, a fundamental part of the struggle of being human.

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