

# The Blessing of the Bicycles



**Whitsuntide**  
**Saturday May 17, 2008**  
**Red Wing, Minnesota**

## **The Blessing of the Bicycles** **By the Quicker Vicar, Matthew Cole**

### **Collect & Blessing**

Vicar: Remember Lord, that many of our bicycles have risen from the dead, much like yourself. Bless these our bikes, let not our hubs spew forth their gears, protect and shield our tires from flats, let our cotter pins remain without blemish, save our thighs from unquenchable fire on the Maiden Rock Hill, and in thy mercy protect us from undue headwinds.

Congregation: Amen

### **Reading of the Commandment**

Vicar: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor his Rudge, nor his Higgins, nor his Dunelt, nor his Raleigh, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

Congregation: What about that Royal Enfield?

Vicar: Neither shalt thou covet the Royal Enfield. The Moulton's right out, too.

**The Reading** (from Genesis, Chapters 2 and 3)

*Men and Women please read responsively where indicated in **Bold**.*

Vicar: In the beginning God created the bicycle, saw that it was good, and on the Seventh day He went for a nice ride on the bike lanes He'd made the day before, and they were good, too, because they were new and He had the angels keep them clear of debris. And God said to Himself,

Noel: Let us create man, because cycling is too much fun to keep to Myself

Vicar: and so God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul, and began watching football on the telly and drinking beer. But God put man in paradise, and commanded him, saying

Noel: Glideth upon the earth anywhere thou wisheth, except for that big hill over there. For on the day thou goeth down that hill, thou shalt surely die.

Vicar: And God said,

Noel: Man needs a companion to keep him from spending too much money on new bicycles.

Vicar: So God caused man to fall into a deep sleep by asking him if he wanted to go clothes shopping at the mall, then took a rib from him. Then God said to Himself,

Noel: Who am I kidding, I'll never hearth the end of it when she finds out she was just a rib,

Vicar: so He created woman from frankincense and myrrh and a certain je ne sais quoi. And God said,

Noel: Let man have dominion over table saws and metric socket wrenches, and let woman have dominion over everything else, and as long as thou art naked and unashamed, thou might as well be fruitful and multiply.

Vicar: Lastly, God created the chicken and the egg, in that order, which should clear up that matter.

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which God had made, and the serpent said to woman,

**Men:** Yea, hath God said you may cycle anywhere but down that hill?

Vicar: And woman said unto the serpent,

**Women:** That's about the size of it: go downhill and die.

Vicar: And the serpent said,

**Men:** Ye shall surely not die, you probably won't even fall off. For God doth know that on the day you go downhill, you shall be as gods and will not need to pedal for a long time. Go on, give it a try.

Vicar: And the woman saw that the hill was good, she did not need to pedal for a long time. She told the man about it, and he also went downhill. The eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves into padded cycling shorts because sometimes it got bumpy going downhill.

And they heard the voice of God in the cool of the day, as He was offroad, fully suspended of course, and they hid their bicycles at the bottom of the hill and started whistling nervously.

**Men:** (*whistle nervously*)

Vicar: And God called unto the man, and said,

Noel: Where art thou?

Vicar: And the man said,

**Men:** We art down here.

Vicar: And God said,

Noel: Hast thou cycled downhill, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not cycle?

Vicar: And man said,

**Men:** It was her idea (*point to nearest woman*)

Vicar: And God said unto the woman,

Noel: What is this that thou hast done?

Vicar: And the woman said,

**Women:** The serpent beguiled me, and I did ride downhill.

Vicar: And God said unto the serpent,

Noel: Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel, and one day thou wilt be sunning thyself on the roadway and a bicycle shalt run thee over, to the surprise of all concerned.

Vicar: And God said unto the woman,

Noel: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow whilst climbing hills; in pain shalt thou perch upon thy saddle.

Vicar: And God said unto the man,

Noel: Because thou hast harkened unto the voice of thy wife, cursed is thy regular bike maintenance. The inner workings of thy hub gear will be beyond thou to repair. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou service thy freewheel.

Vicar: And God said,

Noel: Behold, the man doesn't listen very well,

Vicar: so He kicked him out of paradise and guarded the entrance with a sign with a picture of a bicycle in the middle of a red circle with a line through it. And He had a Cherubim with a flaming sword stop by a few times a week for good measure.

Thus endeth the reading.

**All:** Amen

### **Hymn**

*Please join in singing:*

Amazing Gears, how sweet the sound  
As they tick along in third  
They are just about the sweetest sound  
That I have ever heard.

As we ride up Bay City Hill  
Ascending my Lord t'wards thee  
We wish that we had lower gears  
Than just these bloody three

Help us Lord to become good  
But please Lord not too soon  
There's many a bar before Wabasha  
And cocktails start at noon.

### **A Moment of Silence**

*Please observe a moment of silence in memory of the late Sheldon Brown*

## The Psalm

*Adapted from King James Bible, 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm*

*Please read responsively*

Vicar: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
Congregation: He maketh me to lie down at lunchtime:  
he leadeth me beside back waters.  
Vicar: He restoreth my bike:  
Congregation: he leadeth me in the bikepaths of righteousness for his name's  
sake.  
Vicar: Yea, though I ride through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;  
Congregation: thy rod brakes and thy Dynohub™ they comfort me.  
Vicar: Thou preparest a table before me in the Eagle's Nest Coffeeshop:  
thou anointest my chain with oil;  
Congregation: now my chaincase runneth over.  
Vicar: Surely goodness and Sturme  
y shall follow me all the days of my life:  
Congregation: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

## Dismissal

Vicar: Make straight roads for our feet,  
Congregation: so that the feeble may not be turned out of the way, but may be  
made strong.  
*(Hebrews 12:13)*  
Vicar: In the name of the Trinity, High Gear, Direct Drive and Low, go  
forth and ride.  
All: RAmen

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Service adapted by Matthew Cole, the Quicker Vicar, 2008.

Communion is open to all, but you're going to have to go to the bakery and buy it yourself.  
See separate Notes on Today's Service for background to the Service

*What Would Jesus Ride?*

## Notes on Today's Service:

The chainring on the front cover is from a Rudge; this particular image is taken from **Bike Cult's** website ([www.bikecult.com](http://www.bikecult.com)) and its excellent Chainring Archive. The **Whitsuntide** is the week following Pentecost (last Sunday, also known as Whitsun, or White Sunday) when in Christian tradition the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles and they began speaking in tongues. Whitsunday is another name for Pentecost which in northern Europe became a popular date for Baptisms. In Britain, the newly baptized would wear white robes, hence the White Sunday, Whitsun. Also in Britain, **Whitsun Ales** (referring both to beer specifically and boisterous celebrations generally) were popular and involved boys and men getting drunk in the streets, young people dancing, bowling, and shooting their bows and otherwise carrying on with an enthusiasm more vigorous than the strictly religious celebration required. This was repressed by those humourless Puritans in 1603; after the Restoration, Whitsun Ales revived in more modest form but declined with industrialization and the resulting commercial imperatives which destroyed so much social cohesion and leisure time. The remnants of the Ales eventually evolved into the village church fêtes that carry on to this day.

It is notable how early Pentecost is this year; it is dependent on the date of Easter, which moves about depending on the first full moon after the vernal equinox, and this year fell on March 23. It hasn't been this early since 1913 and won't be this early again in our lifetimes, or our children's, unless they live until 2160 and a few weeks later take part in the 157<sup>th</sup> Annual Lake Pepin Three Speed Tour. Appropriately for this Three Speed Tour, the Sunday after Pentecost, tomorrow, is Trinity Sunday.

British and Empire schools often used Christian names for their terms. **Saint Andrews University** had Michaelmas, Candlemas and Whitsun terms until the 1990s, when they changed to semesters; the **University of Glasgow** still calls its Spring term Whitsun Term. The Commandment, Reading and Psalm were adapted from the **King James Version** of the Bible (first issued 1611, most commonly cited edition is the 1769). This was an update of the first translations of

the Bible into English using the new medium of print by **William Tyndale**. The Church authorities looked upon this with disfavor and, in the true spirit of Christian forgiveness, strangled him and then burned him at the stake, presumably just to make sure, on 6 October 1536. The reading is an adaptation of Genesis 2 and 3, in which man and woman are created, partake of the forbidden fruit, and are cast out of the Garden of Eden. God lectures the serpent a bit although the part about running over a snake whilst riding a bicycle refers to my own personal experience riding from Ames to Des Moines one afternoon in the late 1970s. For the most part, the reading is adapted from **The Cyclist's Apocrypha** which appeared in Britain's **Cycling Plus** in 2001 (see <http://www.bikereader.com/solo/apocrypha.html>) but it's a bit vague as to who the actual author is. It goes on longer with the story of **The Flood** and also has the **Ten Commandments**. The hymn *Amazing Grace* we sung to the tune "**New Britain**" which first appeared in shape note form in the 1831 *Virginia Harmony* but is thought to be based on an older Scottish or Irish melody, as were many white spirituals of the southern uplands. The "tick along in third" refers to the distinctive sound of a Sturmey-Archer AW hub in high gear. The more common lyrics of *Amazing Grace* were written in 1772 by Englishman **John Newton**, a slave-ship captain who became disgusted with the slave trade, repented, and became an anti-slavery activist, lay minister and eventually an ordained minister. The final "Ramen" at the close of the service is our interdenominational nod to **Pastafarians**, those who believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster and think they have been touched by His Noodly Appendage. The Vicar **Matthew Cole** was ordained by the **Universal Life Church** following a rigorous screening process consisting mostly of making sure he had a valid email account. In actual life, Matt's wife Karla is the Music Director at **Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Minneapolis** where Matt sings in the choir most Sundays.

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## In Memoriam: Sheldon Brown

*This is more or less what I said in memory of the great Sheldon Brown.*

Sheldon Brown died on February 3<sup>rd</sup> of this year. I assume most of us know who Sheldon Brown was, but some may not. Sheldon was a cyclist, photographer and writer who was involved with Harris Cyclery in Newton, Massachusetts. He bought a good English 3-speed back in the 1960s, when most bicycles in the U.S. were toys, and loved it. He always liked these bicycles, and anyone searching for Raleigh or Sturmey-Archer or three-speed information quickly ran into the Harris Cyclery site. Some of the parts on my bicycle are from Harris, and I expect there are lots of bits from Boston scattered through the Tour.

Sheldon had an encyclopedic knowledge of cycling which he shared generously. We have all run into Internet know-it-alls who trumpet their superior arcane knowledge. Sheldon was not like that. He was kind and tolerant and patient, generous in a way that's a pleasure to encounter. He commented once on my blog, noting a cabling error in a photo I had posted, and rather than feel stupid for the mistake or chastened, I felt honored; Sheldon Brown reads my blog?! Throughout the cycling blogosphere you'll find the dismay of people learning of his death and story after story of the help and knowledge he shared, through the Internet or in person.

I am a practicing Christian. I do the Tour as the rather lighthearted Vicar. I don't pretend to know what Sheldon Brown believed, but I would say that the way he lived his life should be a model to all of us. We would all do well to be generous and kind and patient with others as Sheldon was, whatever our motivation.

Multiple sclerosis, or complications related to it, caught up with Sheldon. He was diagnosed two or three years ago, was reduced to riding trikes as his balance went, then to having real difficulty in even getting around the house. Characteristically, he blogged his struggles with MS, and there remained for some time his last entry,

done a day or two before his death, haunting in that there was no obvious foreknowledge of how close his final day would be.

Sheldon's death reminds us of the Roman saying *memento mori* -- bear in mind, you too shall die. It may happen tomorrow, it may happen 10 or 20 or 50 years from now, but it will happen. Jesus taught, "If the master of the house had known in what hour of the night the thief would come, he would have watched." One meaning of this teaching is that life may end without warning; live every day prepared for it to be the last. This may sound bleak and depressing, but is the opposite. Approaching every day as if it might be your last raises your spiritual awareness, allows you to appreciate the pleasures of daily life, reminds you to show love, helps you to behave morally. Life is fragile and distressingly short; don't take life too seriously, my mother would say, it's only a temporary condition. Keeping this in mind is an aid to doing good and living fully in the one brief chance we are permitted. If the end came for you tonight, would you be ready?

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Saint Paul, Minnesota May 2008