

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 25th July 2021

Whenever they chose teams for anything, I was always chosen last.

That was partly because I was a year younger than the others in First Year at Secondary School in Paisley. In my Primary School in Johnstone, Peggy Semple and I had been moved from Primary 5 straight into Primary 7, so I was much smaller in stature than my classmates - and partly because I was no good at anything that mattered! I yearned, ached, longed to be athletic and sporty like my Dad and my two younger brothers and, later on, my young sister. I would have sold my soul to anyone who could have found me a way not to be chosen last for football or rounders or whatever.

It didn't help that I preferred to have my nose stuck in a book. I had no sporting talent whatever! Eleven years of age and already a failure.

I spent hours in the local library and I loved composition as it was called then, and I believe it is called "creative writing" nowadays.

In Primary 7, my teacher, Mr MacLeod, was a stickler for English grammar and I lapped it all up! I was a fiend for prepositions and adverbs and gerunds and past participles! Figures of speech, litotes and hyperbole and synecdoche left me gasping for more. I was held spellbound on sleepy sunny afternoons as he wrote on the blackboard, in his beautiful cursive hand, those sentences which cascaded over each other that sounded rich and full bodied, and something in me was connected. I was definitely in love with the English language and Roddy MacLeod liked my stories and he said that I had a talent.

"Aitken," said my mathematics teacher in Fifth Year one dreich January day as he eyed me with thinly veiled malevolence over rimless half glasses after yet another unproductive lesson in Calculus, "I am told that your Latin is good, your French is excellent and your

English is outstanding, and that you have a way with words, whatever that may mean.” Then he continued, “but permit me to advise you that I doubt very much if you will get a decent grade in your Higher Maths!”. And so saying, he smiled mirthlessly.

John Young’s assessment of my intellectual strengths and foibles was accurate in every particular. Mathematics, in all branches of the discipline, were anathema to me, and words did come readily to my lips. And he was quite correct in my appreciation of the glories of the English language in all its beauty.

That was over half a century ago. Now many of my classmates are in various states of decrepitude (as I am) and I am quite sure that their athletic abilities have disappeared as have their waistlines.

But I still am passionate about books and reading and words. Mr MacLeod was right after all.

Words do matter. Language is vitally important. And, of course, it has been one of the most important tools of my trade for over 40 years! I am a grammar elitist!

I was sad to read a few months ago that a spokesperson from the Department of Education had said, “It doesn’t matter if a young person can spell or punctuate; what matters is if he or she can communicate.”

It is now when my hair has almost gone and my “bonnie brow is by no means brent”, and I am as familiar with the taste of Gaviscon as I am with Gordon’s Gin, that I realise what a tremendous power my words have exerted down through my working years.

I have preached thousands of them from pulpits and platforms; I have spoken them as I have sat by a fireside or a hospital bed; I have used them to make speeches at Burns Suppers, Rotary Dinners, wedding receptions, and on all sorts of occasions when steak pie or rubbery chicken are the order of the day – words that seek to challenge and inspire; words that attempt to amuse; words that are meant to bring comfort and consolation; words that try to convey healing and hope.

A few years ago there was a young German who was one of the Assistant Ministers at St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. He had a wonderful, if not fully, comprehensive grasp of English and all its idiosyncrasies. On one occasion he was preaching at an evening service, and the theme of his sermon was our duty to pass on the torch of faith to those who come after us, so that our Christian faith should be grasped and lived out by future generations. It was beautifully delivered, easily understood and he really got his message across to the gathered congregation....and then he came to his concluding sentence, when his stentorian Teutonic tones echoed around the great mediaeval Church, “And what are you and I going to hand down to our posteriors?”

Bless him – we all knew what he meant!

Sir Winston Churchill who was a genius for oratory, once commented that the United Kingdom and the USA are two countries separated by a common language, and how true those words are.

A famous Scottish Presbyterian Minister was invited on a preaching tour of several of the large and very prosperous churches in the States. Unaware of the nuances of language that spanned the continents, he mounted the pulpit stairs of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago, a church with a roll of 5000 members, and packed each Sunday morning, and he announced, “My text this morning is from the Scriptures of the Old Testament, from the Second Book of Kings, “But Naaman was a leper.” And the theme of my sermon is “The “Buts” of the Scriptures.””

At this juncture, the preacher was aware of much stifled laughter throughout the congregation and he was most puzzled, until in the Vestry at the conclusion of the service, his host informed him that “but” was another word for a delicate part of the anatomy!

That particular sermon was not preached throughout the rest of his visit.

Often in Church we confuse people by the language that we use. Ever since Tertullian taught the Church to speak Latin away back in the Third Century AD, we have been so caught up in long theological words and phrases – “justification”, “sanctification”, “predestination”, and so on. But Jesus spoke in simple terms – “Look,” He said, “a lily of the field.” He talked about the “birds of the air” and “a cup of cold water” and “the farmer sowing the seed.” He talked about love, about forgiveness, about compassion and peace and joy. It is of little wonder that the ordinary folk “heard Him gladly”! They understood Him, for starters!

Down the millennia, however, the Church has become so mired in complicated language that folk have switched off, and who can blame them?

I often wonder how very different this world would be if Christians stopped trying to speak FOR God and instead tried to speak IN the language that God has given us, the very vocabulary of heaven – mercy, grace, kindness, peace, and so on.

That is the language that unites and with which others can readily connect, and it is so easy to learn and it understood throughout the world!

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