

26th September 2020

Brevity

“Brevity is the sister of talent.”

Anton Chekhov, in a letter to Alexander Chekhov, 1889

A minister was invited to preach at Crathie Kirk in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen, and to be a houseguest of the royal party at Balmoral for the weekend. On arrival, he was assigned a personal valet, who carried his case, put his things away carefully and generally fussed around. As the valet was taking his leave, he remarked, “Just to remind you, sir, that you will be asked to say Grace before dinner this evening,” adding quickly, “and, though it may not be my place to say, sir, it would be appreciated in certain quarters if the Grace could err on the side of brevity.”

In due course, Grace was said, dinner was served and the visiting minister passed a peaceful night. The valet appeared the next morning, and, while busying himself folding the guest’s pyjamas, commented, “It may not be my place to say, sir, but the dinner yesterday evening was deemed to be a great success, and, if I may add, sir, the brevity of the Grace was much appreciated ...” and after the briefest of pauses continued, “unlike that of the Moderator of the General Assembly last weekend, sir, whose Grace we all thought was a forerunner of the Sunday sermon.”

“Brevity is the sister of talent”, Chekhov wrote. I try to confine each “Thought for the Day” to around 300 words. But over lunch recently, a friend offered this helpful additional thought: “I like your prayers,” she remarked, “and mostly because they’re short. One sentence, no more than two lines. After all, most days, that’s as much as I can cope with.”

In the movie, *Amadeus*, Emperor Joseph II remarks to the young and effervescent Mozart: “My dear young man, don’t take it too hard. Your work is ingenious. It is quality work. [But] there are simply too many notes.” I have an image of God having to cope with the effervescence of our prayers, and saying to us, “Don’t take it too hard. But there are simply too many words ...” It’s a message to you and me as God’s houseguest that it would be appreciated in certain quarters if our prayers were to err on the side of brevity. “After all, most days, that’s as much as I can cope with.”

A prayer for today

Lord, hear my prayer and let my cry come to you, even when I have little to say. Amen

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