

28th March 2022

Plainly

“Perfect plainness in speech is allied with perfect nobleness.”

Matthew Arnold, On Translating Homer

In an Irish courtroom, a judge is inclined to let a plaintiff off with a light sentence for what the Bench considers a trivial offence. Addressing the accused’s barrister, he says, “You’ll be aware of the principle of *De minimis non curat lex*, my honourable friend.” [“The Law does not concern itself with trifles.”] To which the defending barrister replies, “Indeed, my Lord. In the streets of Limerick where my client resides, they speak of nothing else.”

I rarely use my high-school Latin to translate a Latin tag or inscription. Why would I need to remember what my Latin teacher tried to instil in me in the 1960s when I can look it up in *Google Translate*? (Would that I’d had access to such a resource when I was bogged down in endless translations of *Caesar’s Gallic Wars ...*) Oh, and by the way ... While I’m on the subject, why does the Church of Scotland continue to use archaic Latin phrases in its business? Begone *pro re nata, in hunc effectum, ex cathedra, primus inter pares, sederunt* and *a priori*, begone!

Let’s speak plainly and make ourselves properly understood. If we have something to say, let us say it with sensitivity and tolerance. But let us offer it with “perfect plainness in speech”, and “with perfect nobleness” in a language people can relate to and understand.

In his first letter to the Church in Corinth, St Paul has something to say about those for whom “speaking in tongues” had become the be-all-and-end-all of Christian service. In 1 Corinthians 14:7-9 he writes:

Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words ... how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.

If we have a message to proclaim, why would we speak in “unintelligible words” which might mean we are “speaking into the air”, when we can speak the message of God’s love in a way everyone can understand? Let’s speak plainly, and let the meaning of God’s love be made all the clearer.

A prayer for today

Lord, speak plainly of your love to me that I might show your love plainly to others.