

28th October 2022

Familiarity

“Familiarity breeds contempt – and children!”

Mark Twain, *Notebooks*

Several years ago, I conducted an act of worship in a Church of Scotland Eventide Home. This Care Facility housed about thirty elderly residents, in various stages of physical and mental decline. In contrast, however, their spirituality appeared undiminished, and the worship service, immediately following a Sunday lunch, was attended by the majority of those in the home, both residents and staff. It was a wonderful occasion.

One of the residents had been an elder in one of my congregations. She was now suffering from advanced dementia and had no idea who I was or, indeed, what was happening round about her. She sat in the front row, constantly fiddling with her cardigan. Until, that is, we started to sing the first hymn. On the advice of the staff, I'd chosen well-known items of praise. And there she was, singing along, never missing a word, *and* without recourse to a hymn book. It was the same for the two other hymns we sang. For this lovely lady, familiarity bred neither contempt nor children, but offered her security, purpose and reassurance.

When we were done, I stood at the door as the residents left. Most of them had Zimmers or walking-frames of one sort or another. As they headed towards me, I could sense an impending crisis. Too many people, with too many Zimmers, were going to try to get through the door at the same time, thus creating a multiple-walking-frame-pile-up. I was about to step forward to police the impending traffic chaos, but there was no need. For, by the time the proliferation of people with walking-aids arrived at the door, they negotiated around each other with commensurate skill. One from this side, another from that, one slowing up, another moving ahead. Like a Red Arrows Display Team, or interweaving motorcyclists at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, they were well-practiced. The procedures were familiar. There was no need for me to worry.

In the singing of hymns for a dementia patient or negotiating a doorway with walking frames, familiarity matters. Repetition, practice, routines, shouldn't be decried if they give people the security, purpose and reassurance they need – *and* avert potential Zimmer-related disasters.

A prayer for today

Familiar in prayer? I hope so, for it's the reassurance I need today. Amen

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