

27th March 2023

Vernacular

“The artistic legitimacy of the vernacular.”

Wikipedia , *Description of the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer*

My reflection a while back on “footer” elicited a range of responses – from people sharing Scots words they’d learned or never understood, to others who hinted that I might be over-using the Scots dialect in my writing. Today’s piece might elicit an even *wider* response: from those who’ll easily understand, to some who will have no clue what I’m on about. To the latter group, I make no apology, and simply invite you to try to figure it out ...

When I was a Probationer Minister, I worked in Glasgow with a wonderful man called John Cook. John was the parish minister, and, though not a priest, was regularly called “Faither” – simply because he wore a clerical collar! And John regularly lapsed into the Scots vernacular. On one memorable occasion, I sat with him (*and* a glowering headmaster) on the stage of a Secondary School assembly, faced with 200 restless and disinterested teenagers, at 9am on a Wednesday morning. After the obligatory hymn – *Kumbaya*, as I recall, battered out big-style on an old, upright piano, but with nobody singing – followed by a prayer (which was more a sea of backs than the occasional bowed head) John moved to the edge of the stage and commanded attention, not by shouting, but by his captivating personality – and his graphic use of the vernacular.

“Right, you lot,” he began. “Today ah’m gonnae tell you a story frae the bible, about a punter ca’ed Joseph. Noo, lots of fowk think the bible’s fu’ o’ cissies an’ softies. But ah ken different. See this Joseph? Weel, he was naethin’ but a bampot an’ a nyaff.” And in a few sentences, the story of Joseph, the “bampot and nyaff”, was graphically recounted. There was not one of those 200 kids who wasn’t fully engaged with the talk.

John didn’t speak that way all the time. Neither do I. But in the right place, in the right way and with the right language, good communication works. And aren’t those who hear the Word in *their* vernacular more engaged than they might otherwise be – like 200 kids in a secondary school assembly at 9am on a Wednesday morning, who learned that the Bible’s Joseph was actually like many of them?

A prayer for today

“Lord, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of your tone.”

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879)