

19th November 2024

Understanding

"The strange infirmities of human understanding."

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

In 1969, when I offered myself as a candidate for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, I was invited to attend a "Selection School", designed to ascertain the attributes (or otherwise) of the applicants, through interviews, group exercises, working through a pastoral dilemma, a psychological assessment, and the like. I was extremely nervous when I arrived at the venue. But I was met by the Selection School chairperson, who, having ascertained my name, shook me warmly by the hand, introduced me to one or two others, and tried to make me feel at home.

"You come from Fort William?" he asked. *An obvious, ice-breaker question. Easy to answer ...* "Yes," I replied quietly. *I'm doing OK so far, I thought.* But the next question was a bit of a curveball. "Do you fish?" *What?* I thought. *This is not at all what I expected.* "No," I responded. "But my uncle John is a fishmonger ..." *Doh!* I *did* get through the process, though fifty years of ministry have failed to eradicate that inauspicious start from my memory.

This came back to mind when my minister recently based his sermon on fishing metaphors from our local community. He confessed that he could not call himself a fisherman. "I was brought up near a salmon-fishing river," he said. "A family member, from time to time, no-questions-asked, managed to take delivery of a large salmon – which was kept fresh in our bath. But ... finding salmon in the bath doesn't make you a fisherman." No more, I could add, than if your uncle John was a fishmonger!

In the "strange infirmities of human understanding" we cannot say that we know or understand about something because we *think* we do, or if we have a tenuous connection to it. For example, I have had to live through a series of bereavements in my life, but I can't say that I understand what it is like to be widowed, because I have never been widowed. If understanding means having a working knowledge of the situation in which someone finds themselves, or experience of what it feels like to be in their position, beware of extrapolation from a little knowledge to a lot, or making assumptions when you may be very far from the truth.

A prayer for today

Let patience be my watchword, listening my attribute, sensitivity my approach. Amen

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