

11 April 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

One day, I was with a witty friend at the box office in Stratford. He was buying a ticket for a performance of Hamlet that evening.

"Just one seat left," said the sale's clerk.

"I'll take it," he said.

"You're lucky. Most nights we're sold out. Hamlet is popular."

"I know." He leaned a bit closer. "It's *full* of quotations!"

The clerk laughed. "As if Shakespeare wrote Hamlet with *Bartlett's Quotations* at his elbow! Hah!"

"That went well," he said as we left the box office.

"The ticket?" I asked.

"No, my joke. I was dying to try it out." He sported the look of a stand-up comic who feels he's landed a 'good one'. A bit too self-satisfied. Would it surprise you if I said he was a clergyman? A *Presbyterian* clergyman? No, I didn't think so.

"Meh..." I said, secretly wishing I'd thought of this joke myself. I tucked it away to use one day. Which I just did.

Cliché Fatigue

We all have a storehouse of old jokes, little sayings, and well-worn clichés. They're tucked away but ready-to-hand. "Time flies when you're having fun." "It's no use crying over spilled milk." "Haste makes waste", "You look as fit as a fiddle." "And *you* look like you woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

They're as comfortable as the favourite pair of socks we grab from the drawer without thinking. After many 'wearings' and 'washings', though, they wear a bit thin. We may not notice the hole in the heel.

Once upon a time, clichés were the fresh offspring of someone's inventive mind. Then a gust of popularity wafted them through the air like a dandelion's 'parachutes' on a summer breeze. They landed far from their first home.

"Variety is the spice of life" is a cliché that detached itself long ago from William Cowper's poem, "The Task". Even Cowper's descendants may not know this. Nor may they care as much as I do, which is only a bit.

“Variety is the spice of life” has lost all its zing for me. More than that, it makes me wince and cringe. This may be because I associate it with someone I dislike. You wouldn’t know him. He used to utter this and other clichés like a pugnacious parrot, *ad nauseum* at irrelevant moments, as if for attention. It was the kind of thing he’d ‘just say’ when he felt he ‘just had to say something’.

(The idiot in question was, in fact, a callow, younger version of myself. The Beta Version, not Me 2.0, debugged and updated.)

But that’s the hazard of clichés, isn’t it? They can become something we ‘just say’ instead of *saying* something. And yet, when they’re fresh and memorable, we can’t help collecting them and repeating them, can we?

“Brevity is the soul of wit.” “He must be cruel to be kind.” “There’s method in his madness.” Until Bartlett’s Quotations borrowed these saying, we had them directly on loan from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. And yet, “*Neither a borrower nor a lender be.*” But ‘Polonius’ says that, and he’s a boring old windbag. Let’s not listen to him. We can’t help borrowing clichés and loaning them out. Without them, we’d often be lost for words.

We may not know that many of our clichés emigrated from the high diction of the Authorised Version (aka the ‘King James Bible’) to the lowlands of common parlance and platitude. For example: “a law unto themselves”, “at his wit’s end”, “eat, drink and be merry”, “fell by the wayside”, “from strength to strength”, “in the twinkling of an eye”, “a two-edged sword”, “white as snow”, “woe is me”, and “suffer fools gladly.”

But woe to the fools who suffered an ‘improvement’ to the Authorised Version of the Christmas story. Here’s their ghastly stab at a new translation: “She wrapped him up well and laid him in a box where cattle are fed. She put him there because the guest room was full.”

Good God. I understand the intention. Almost. *Make the meaning clearer.* But is it? It’s clunky and awkward. It sins by being boring even *before* it’s familiar, which it never will be, I pray. I want to remember this new translation as much as I want to memorise a software license before I click ‘agree’.

Meaning is carried not just by *what* is said, but by *how* it’s said. The Authorised Version stays fresh and elegant through its simplicity and beauty. Except for an occasional, unusual word (but far fewer than you’d find in your computer’s ‘Users Guide’), it’s very understandable. Its earthy language appeals to the mind’s eye, its rhythms to the ear. It’s *meant* to be heard.

Mind you, it's not as accurate as current scholarly translations, nor is its language as 'inclusive' as we'd now want it to be. So, there's *that*. But we know many of its parts off by heart. When we hear it at Christmas, we feel a faint thrill each time. "She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

If there weren't such a 'war on tradition' going on in Church and Society, we might still be reading the Authorised Version in Church on Sundays. (Boomers would hate that. Should I give it a go? I'm feeling mischievous.)

I refuse to let this sentiment 'date' me, by the way. I'll not go gently into Geezerdom's good night. Mine is a plea for *beauty*, whatever its source may be, in liturgy as in life. Some traditions should be ditched. Some innovations should be welcomed. And vice-versa.

Dead Metaphors Society

So, I propose a 'war on cliché' instead. I know. That's a pretty impudent gauntlet for a preacher to throw down. Sermons are as littered with clichés as a rubbish dump with seagulls. They litter this 'letter' too, for that matter.

"Physician, heal thyself."

Alright. I hear you.

But the war I propose would be waged on those clichés that are, in fact, metaphors that have *already* died. They've succumbed to misuse and overuse. They're as empty as a battery that's lost its charge, as dead as Python's dead parrot. They've lost the power to say what they used to say. Why, then, do we dress them up and haul them to parties like the corpse from *Weekend at Bernie's*?

Business-speak is a cliché greenhouse. Its homegrown varieties migrate to the 'Church World' once they've been pensioned off. Here's a sampling: "We have to push the edge of the envelope and think outside the box if we're ever to take it to the next level. I'm talking blue-sky thinking, people. That would be a game changer to run up the flagpole, wouldn't it?"

I think what this means is: "Why don't we try something new?"

When we borrow and speak clichés that lack any vital signs, I suspect we do it, not to express what we honestly think, but to relieve us from having to think at all. In the same way, we may borrow fads and follow fashions, not to feel truly alive and be truly ourselves, but as a substitute for living our *own* lives, a relief from the burden of choice.

The word 'cliché' may itself be a cliché. It's a French word for the engraved metal plates used in printing presses. If our lives feel lifeless, perhaps it's because we're churning out the same page over and over again, re-living the same old experiences, repeating the same old scripts, and following the same old journeys, the way the milkman's horse used to follow the same old route with unthinking habit. If these have lost their vitality, why don't we try something new?

Our lives convey their meaning not just by *what* we say and do, but by *how* we say and do it. Martin Amis, a grouchy novelist, collected a sheaf of his essays under the title, *The War Against Cliché*. His weapon is wit. He aims it not just at "clichés of the pen, but at clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart." They oppose "qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice."

They're qualities we can all exhibit. They're worth fighting for.

Just for Laughs

If you miss *hearing* sermons and you love a good laugh, you may want to watch a young Alan Bennett performing a comedy routine as a Church of England vicar in a production of *Beyond the Fringe* from 1964.

You'll see right away how little has changed. Notice, too, how unerringly he captures the clichés of the pulpit – language, cadence, and gesture, all three. Click here if you're starved for humour:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0qOD9rtOEE>

If your spirit is more sedate than sacrilege, click to watch a service prepared by some members of the Presbytery of London:

<https://youtu.be/09gTdZpxCKs>

People think I'm obstinately against the You-Tube-ing of worship services. I'm not, though I am allergic to fads. But a long period of theological reflection, rooted in experience, has led me to conclude that *watching* people worship God on a screen is not the same as worshipping God. It's complicated but I think I've worked out why that is. But I fear it would bore you!

Yours in the faith,
Andrew