**Ministerial Meandering 13-19 Sept 2021.**

‘The appropriate use of worms’.

Yesterday I sent off a Ministerial Meandering, and barely before the ink had dried on the page, Sheila pounced on it and told me that I couldn’t send it. I was, apparently, using words in an ‘inappropriate’ way.

When our girls were still small I used to tease them about getting their ‘worms’ right - by which I meant ‘words’, of course - but they enjoyed the joke. And it seems as though I still have a problem. I won’t tell you what I was writing about as it is not relevant to what I am writing now, but just tell you that I am amazed at how our use of words changes so fast, and the meanings we attribute to them.

(As an aside, I should mention that my Meanderings will not always have a theological aspect to them, as, despite what you may think, I do not spend all my day in ‘higher thoughts’ - even if you think I should!)

The words that slide so easily off our tongues today contain a significantly different vocabulary than we used 50 or 60 years ago. Everyday words like ‘computer’ and ‘email’ and ‘website’ - and even ‘cellphone’, were unheard of in the 1960’s. My father stopped joining in with the technological advances at about the time that the first cellphone was introduced in April, 1973. At that time it was an enormous piece of kit, and you needed arms like Arnie Schwartznegger to be able to lift it. If you tried to talk to my Dad about emails and so on, he would respond with, “What’s wrong with writing a letter?” He died stubbornly ignorant of so many advances that could have improved his life.

Now we have to be so careful of how we use our ‘worms’. It is so easy to be ‘inappropriate’ without meaning to be. When I was young, the word ‘gay’ meant ‘happy’, and the word ‘queer’ meant ‘strange’ or ‘peculiar’. To take your dogs for a walk with a friend and his or her dogs would be to go ‘dogging’, to me - but now, to go ‘dogging’ means…well, I’ll let you find out for yourselves, but it’s not an activity I would engage in!

The word, ‘appropriate’ itself is fraught with hidden meaning too - as I found out yesterday. I had thought it meant, ‘fitting’, ‘proper’, ‘in line with’, ‘apposite’; I was aware that it could also be used as a verb, ‘to appropriate something’ would be to take possession of something, sometimes without permission of the owner.

But now I find that it has a political meaning or overtone if prefaced by the word, ‘cultural’. Now we are dealing with linguistic dynamite. ‘Cultural appropriation’ is a rather nasty animal and is defined as ‘the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of another culture or identity. This can be controversial when members of a dominant culture appropriate from minority cultures.’

And, of course, this is where we can get into difficulty. In South Africa, to wear a Madiba shirt or Zulu beads, or to use Zulu expressions in one’s speech would not be seen as ‘cultural appropriation’, but more as ‘cultural appreciation’ - the black Africans being far numerically superior to the white races. However, here, because of the fewer Indigenous numbers in Canada, use of such practices are seen as derogatory and insulting. How very careful we have to be, despite our best intentions! Let no-one be in any doubt here - we are treading on egg-shells, and unfortunately not ostrich eggs, which you can stand on without them breaking.

In our current political climate (which some might argue has become a little over-sensitive) we must learn to avoid expressions of speech and language that have any hint of cultural appropriation - even if you meant it as cultural appreciation. This trend will pass, however, just as the term ‘jerrycan’ is no longer pejorative for the fuel container made for the German military in the 1930’s.

Just be very careful if you want to invite your friend to walk your dogs together, or - possibly worse - intend to go viewing a few cottages.

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