

Villages - July 2025

Do you like proverbs?

I find them fascinating for many reasons: they are often a legacy from the days before reading and writing; they are pre-scientific, but often have their own semi-scientific logic; and their final forms are peculiar to a particular society or culture, while the truths they communicate are often almost universal.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

In English, we talk about killing two birds with one stone, while in German it is two flies with one hit.

In India there is a saying “Don’t bargain for fish that are still in the water”, while we say that “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” or advise not “to count your chickens before they are hatched”.

There is a whole book of the Bible which is made up of a collection of proverbs, some of which are familiar to us even today. One of my favourites is “Even a foolish person seems wise as long as he keeps his mouth shut.”

One of the things you quickly learn about proverbs, however, is that they often seem to have a pair which says the exact opposite:

“Many hands make light work” vs “Too many cooks spoil the broth”.

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder” vs “Out of sight, out of mind”.

And that leads me to the observation I wish to make this month: be open to the idea that the thing you are so passionately in favour of has an opposite twin which is just as reasonable.

We seem to be in a time when we struggle to accept that there is genuine room for disagreement, when you have to be completely signed up to a view point. You have to be either in favour of a completely unregulated free market, or you can be a dyed-in-the-wool socialist, but you cannot be both. You must either want unlimited immigration, or you are racist. What has happened to nuance or being moderate?

Capitalism has led to the greatest growth in human wealth and the standard of living in our history as a species, but it has also caused much damage and inequality. Communism is a wonderful goal, but it is hard to

be motivated if hard work is not rewarded, and it fails to factor in human greed and competition. Democracy is less efficient than most other forms of government, but it allows a genuine variety of views to be held which is surely worth the trade-off.

So the next time you or I come across an issue and know without doubt that our view is the right one, let's pause and see if we can spot the truth in the exact opposite view. There won't always be one - some views are simply untenable - but it is surprising how often there is. After all, in trying to be the great minds that think alike, we need to avoid being the fools who seldom differ.