

The Significance of Letters

A sermon delivered in the Charterhouse, Sutton's Hospital Chapel at the
10am Service on Sunday 6th September 2020

The Rev'd Peter Watkins



The Rev'd Peter Watkins was Vicar of St Matthew's, Ealing Common until his retirement. He is a residential Brother at the 16th century Charterhouse, Charterhouse Square, London. Educated at Charterhouse School, Peter served in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in Korea and subsequently read Theology at Oxford. A curacy in St James's Piccadilly was followed by an associate-ship at another St James's, in Birmingham, Michigan, USA. He is author of thirteen books including 'The Soul of Wit' about the oddities of the Church of England. He has also been a contributor to the Church Times and for five years wrote their annual Lenten reflections.

I started to write letters when, at eight years old, I went to my preparatory boarding school. I went on writing them when I was away from home and far away, abroad, and when, in various ways, they became part of my parochial ministry. Each Week I write them, still in an age when there are other forms of communication because in them things can be said that no other genre can say sincerely, faithfully, truly, gratefully, with love, with lots of love, with a kiss and lots of kisses. They can be a joy to send and a joy to get.

Anthony Trollope thought that a pleasant letter was the most pleasant thing that this world has to give. Francis Bacon wrote: "Letters, and such as written from wise men, are of all the words of man, in my judgement, the best."

Some years ago, a lament was penned by Antonia Laird. It has the merit of being simple and clean and it made a point that I want to make.

'In years to come, there'll be no letters, yellowed at the edge, to save for generations yet unborn. There'll be no diaries left for them to see, how great grandfather spent his day, or worked his way on freight ships across the seas. No love notes hidden in a secret drawer, tied with a faded ribbon to read again once more. The telephone is close at hand and we no longer understand the pen. How deep the loss of all those yesterdays with joy or sorrow, if they are all forgotten by tomorrow.'

A loss indeed. It prompts me to consider the place of letters in personal relationships and in Christianity. There is much variety in them. They can be informative, affectionate, intimate, whimsical, flippant, earnest, compassionate and more. When writing letters to the young I have at times enjoyed being absurdly nonsensical.

Not all of them are good to get. Some are written in rage and bitterness and with evil intent. The advice of a Chinese proverb is 'Never write a letter while you are angry'. If that advice had always been followed a mountain of trouble would have been avoided. An example of an evil letter is to be found in the bible, in the Second Book of Samuel' in the eleventh chapter. This utterly wicked letter was written by David, generally regarded as a Jewish hero. It is there to be read and to shock any reader. Read it and see what I mean.

I turn to a lighter side and as this is a sermon it is appropriate to do so with the letters of two English clergymen. One of them, Sydney Smith, was called the Wit of Wits in an Age of Wits. This most hilarious cleric wrote in a letter to Lady Holland on 13th September 1842:

'It is a bore, I admit, to be past seventy.....We are, at the close of life, only hurried away from stomach-aches, pains in the joints, from sleepless nights and unamusing days, from weakness, ugliness, and nervous tremors; but we shall meet again in another planet, cured of all our defects. Rogers will be less irritable; Macaulay more silent; Hallam will assent; Jeffrey will speak slower; Bobus will be just as he is; I shall be more respectful to the upper clergy; but I shall have as lively a sense as I now have of all your kindness and affection for me'.

I treasure and am amused by a letter from that fundamentally Christian man, John Wesley. He had no truck with the anti-intellectualism of the man who had written to him:

'The Lord has directed me to write to you and tell you while you know both Greek and Hebrew, he can do without your book learning'. Wesley incisively answered with his letter; 'Your letter received, and I say [it]...was superfluous, as I already knew that the Lord could do without my learning... While the Lord does not direct me to tell you, yet I wish to say... on my own responsibility, that the Lord does not need your ignorance either'.

I am a preacher addressing a congregation. If I was a schoolteacher speaking to a class I might, at the end, set homework. Here is a pretend homework for you – to list all the devotional and theological Christian classics expressed in letters. From early days letters have played a large part in the history of Christianity (to the present time). No doubt in several places in the world the letters of the New Testament are now being read aloud in churches at celebrations of the Mass or the Holy Communion. Paul the apostle, the first major thinker of that Christian Church expressed himself in at least nine of the twenty-one epistlers of the New Testament.

Another ancient set of letters, lacking the compilations of Pauline thought, are those of Ignatius of Antioch. Their attraction is that they are immediately comprehensible. Ignatius wrote seven letters to different Christian communities on his way to martyrdom in Rome in about AD 107. He confessed: ‘All I pray is that when the moment comes the lion will be quick about it’. There are few earlier insights into Christianity.

If you are good students and do your homework you will surely discover all the wonderful Christian classics that have come down to us in the form of letters, and that tradition has continued into our own times. There has been, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘Letters and papers from prison’. It was perhaps the most creative theological work of the nineteenth century. The ‘Screwtape Letters’ was also very widely read, in it C.S Lewis used the epistolary form with ingenuity and imagination to create diabolical correspondence containing the advice of a senior demon, Screwtape to Wormwood, a minor devil. Lewis also wrote ‘Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer’ to his godson. In both books he offered food for thought in different ways, but in both digestive food and both in the form of letters.

I will not lengthen what I now have to say by describing all the various letters that I have written as part of my parochial and pastoral duties, to young and old and those between, to instruct and to cheer, to provoke thought and vitally to bring laughter.

I finish on a high not with a text from a letter. It lists good things. I suggest that letters can be included in what Paul the Apostle wrote to the Philippian Christians:

‘Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things’.

Amongst these good things remember to include letters for they can be very good indeed.

Amen.