

The Writing of a Letter

Trinity 7 – 10th July 2016

LETTER WRITING

People often bemoan the lost art of writing letters.

But I think that loss didn't occur recently – it happened around 2000 years ago, shortly after the time that Saint Paul was writing his letters.

When I was at school we were taught to start letters with '*Dear Sir/Madam*'. When Saint Paul begins Colossians he writes:

'Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.'

Which strikes me as a far more eloquent beginning!

COLOSSIANS

Today we continue our occasional series on the epistles as they come up over the summer – and today is the turn of Colossians – another letter of Saint Paul – or is it?

If Galatians is definitely by Paul, then Colossians is a bit more doubtful.

But then again, what does it mean to speak of authorship in a culture where all letter writing was a collaborative exercise? Just as government ministers don't always write their own speeches and yet it is still their speech, so Paul's letters were probably ghost written by Timothy – and that is suggested in the opening sentence. Paul might even have been dead by the time this letter was written – but that doesn't make much difference – because pseudonymous writing was common in the 1st century. It was not deceitful, but a respectful way of continuing someone's legacy and influence. Timothy may well have been writing in the *personae* of Paul, we shall probably never know, and I'm not sure it matters either.

FOR WE HAVE HEARD OF YOUR FAITH

What we do know is that the Colossian Church was admired:

'For we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.'

'Saints' here is simply the ordinary men and women of the Church, literally 'holy ones'. This is not because there were more virtuous than anyone else, or even us, it was simply a statement of fact. Someone once said that *'sinners are just saints in the making'*, a reminder that the Christian life is one of transformation. We are all holy ones, saints, not because of any pious achievement of our own, but because we share in the holiness of Christ through Baptism. It might be rather nice if we went around calling each other 'saints'!

This is not to say that we shouldn't try to be good. Paul is impressed by the mutual love of the community, which acts like a family. This is a central theme of the letter – that all Christians are part of one big family.

Like any family, our relationships with each other are not always perfect, but we try to bear with one another, even to love each other. Like a family, there is a 'givenness' in our relationships. We might not even particularly like each other, but as part of the same family, we have a connection that can never be broken and a commitment that can't be ignored.

Paul calls this family, the 'Body of Christ', with Christ as the Head.

Rant alert: One thing I can't stand is when people call the Queen the 'Head of the Church'. She most certainly isn't. The Sovereign is the *Supreme Governor* – because only Christ is the Head of the Church – and that is a point that matters. To call Christ the Head of the Church is not just a hierarchical metaphor, but it is also to say that Christ is the centre, the life-giving source, like the head of a stream from which the water flows.

And here's a question:

Have people heard of *our* faith and the love we have for each other?

I know there is much real faith, and much real love in this Church, but we are perhaps not always quite so good at communicating it to others. That's one of the reasons why I am keen for us a Church to establish a Publicity Group which will help us to reach out so that other people can hear what we are about and what we are doing.

BEARING FRUIT AND GROWING

The other big theme of Colossians is 'growth'.

Everything about the Church there is pregnant with possibility and newness. Paul talks about how they are '*bearing fruit and growing*', and he means this in two ways: He means it literally in the sense of growing in numbers, and that is important. But that goes hand-in-hand with growing in faith. It is a growth that is both outward and inward.

In the Gospels Christ loved to use organic images of vines and branches and seeds and shrubs. It's these sorts of images that Paul has in mind.

If you've been to the church of San Clemente in Rome, there is a huge mosaic that shows Christ as the Tree of Life – and in His branches are all kinds of animals and fruit and people.

And so perhaps this letter makes us think about our own lives:

- – Where do you see signs of growth in your life?
- – What is currently withering and needs pruning?
- – How rooted are you in Christ?
- – What are the fruits of your activities?

These are questions we should reflect on as individuals, but also as a Church. In September, the PCC will go away together for a day to think about our life as Church; what is currently bearing fruit, what might need to be pruned, where growth might come from? We look forward to sharing those reflections with you.

HE HAS RESCUED US FROM THE POWER OF DARKNESS

The last major theme of Colossians is perhaps the most misunderstood.

When Paul says, '*Christ has rescued us from the power of darkness*', he is not being misanthropic or world hating. Paul was a realist with something of a pessimistic streak. He looked around and he saw a lot of evil and it depressed him, but he looked at the Church and he saw hope and joy and peace. And it is the Church as a beacon of hope that is emphasised throughout the letter.

I believe that the Church is still a beacon of hope to a sad and suffering world.

One of the things that the Church tries to do, is to be **in** the world, but not **of** it. It is a difficult balancing act; being *part* of society, but also standing a bit *apart* from it, and so remaining different, distinctive and exciting.

Some of you might have heard that this weekend the General Synod is discussing whether clergy are still required to wear some kind of special vesture for services. A debate that one newspaper reported as whether clergy could wear '*mankinis in the pulpit*'! It's easy to think that what clergy wear is outdated, and whether they wear vestments at all is irrelevant – I couldn't disagree more.

What it's actually about is saying that Church is different and special – it is not like what goes on outside in the world. Saying that clergy should only be required to wear something 'seemly and proper' which could be a business suit or a smart frock is to undermine the nature of the Church itself as a divine society pointing towards the redeemed life in heaven.

For Paul, Christians are orientated in a fundamentally different direction from everyone else – away from darkness and towards the light.

At Mass, we face east, towards the light, for heaven is our direction of travel. One thing that Saint Michael's is known for is its tradition of worship, which in its beauty and richness, is a place to connect with something 'other'. We are still in the world but it is facing towards something else, the ultimate reality, and it is this ultimate reality that Paul has in mind when he looks out at the world and sees darkness. It is not dark in itself, but it is made dark by the shadows thrown by the dazzling light of the glory of heaven.

CHALLENGE

I'd like to set us all a challenge this week – to read all of the letter to the Colossians.

It's not long, only a few pages, because we are going to hear it at Church for the next four weeks, and if we have read it then we will get more out of it.

For whoever wrote it, Paul, Timothy, or someone else, it is truly one of the most impressive texts ever written, and it still has so much to offer us today.

Letter writing has never been quite so good since.

Fr Stephen Stavrou