

Paul's first letter to the Christians of Thessalonika, a town in northern Greece, is the first piece of Christian literature. Paul, having moved across to Greece from Asia (Turkey), was forced to leave Phillipi and so moved one hundred miles east to Thessalonika and established a community of Christians there. He seems to have stayed some time with them, "slaving night and day so as not to be a burden" on the (2,9) before being compelled to leave and move on once more, now to Athens. There he found little interest in his teaching, and so travelled on south-west to Corinth, where new ideas and fresh opportunities were always welcome. He would stay in Corinth for eighteen months and from there he wrote back to the church at Thessalonika to encourage them., and perhaps complete business unfinished owing to his hasty departure; it was his first epistle.

Letter writing would become an important way for Paul to keep in touch with his communities; to praise them, thank them, deal with problems which had arisen, admonish them and, in the case of Galatians, rebuke them with bitter anger for moving away from the Gospel he had given them. Paul's letters soon began to be collected and treasured. Little can he have imagined that his correspondence would form the greater part of a new set of Sacred Scriptures which along side the sacred texts of his own ancient faith would be the Holy Writings for millions of people across thousands of years. That he, Paul, should be read alongside Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Moses! The thought would have astonished and perplexed him. He was dealing with mighty matters sometimes, but other times he was dealing with squabbings and gossipings; the day to day fall outs of every community.

Letter writing in the ancient world was no easy matter. The paper had to be prepared. It was made from papyrus, reeds which grew along the Nile. Strands of the plant were meshed together, lattice-style, glued, and pressed to form sheets which were prepared for ink by rubbing with pumice-stone. The process was expensive. Then ink had to be made, from soot and glue; the pen cut, and the scribe was now ready to take dictation. Paul himself wrote hardly anything. He concludes six of his letters by signing them with his ungainly script, (In Galatians he writes, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand" - Gal. 6,11; see also 2Thess 3,17; 1Cor. 16,21; Phm 19, Col.4,18;) but the actually writing is done by a trained secretary who, as a colleague, sometimes adds his own name and greeting at the end of the epistle (see Rom. 16,23 - "I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord").

Paul's decision to make communication by letter a major way of continuing contact with his people was not an easy or straightforward one. It was costly; it was time consuming. The dictation had to be right first time as there was no tippex, no easy erasure, unless the mistake was quickly noticed and the ink wiped with a damp cloth. No self-respecting scribe would send a letter with crossings-out. Mistakes or changes of mind meant new papyrus and that was not an option. Writings materials were so precious through to the middle ages that palimpsests were commonplace: reusing used paper by writing over, or writing at right angles over the original. In

consequence some very important documents were preserved. In the ancient world everyday stuff - bills or receipts, or shopping lists, were written on potsherds, bits of broken pottery.

Although we know we do not possess all the letters that Paul wrote – he refers to “the tearful letter” he wrote to the Corinthians (cf 2Cor 2,4) which is lost; and all the letters that go under Paul's name were not all written by him (seven of the thirteen in the New Testament attributed to Paul are certainly by him; others are Pauline, written by disciples according to Paul's thought and given authority by his name being added [a common practice in antiquity]) nevertheless we are graced to have those that we do have, which gives such insight into the mind of the first theologian of the Church, and life in the young Christian communities.

These days it seems everyone is a blogger, or a tweeter, or a texter. Even grannies text and send e-mails. The letter appears to be consigned to the disused post-box that no postman ever empties. Do children have any idea how to set out a letter? Would they inevitably begin “Hi” instead of “Dear...”? Could a teenager distinguish between Yours truly, faithfully or sincerely?

I am nostalgic for the letter. As a student overseas there was a real thrill when a letter with your name on it appeared on the post table by the noticeboard; and a collapse of the shoulders when there was none. Communication today is so much easier that it is routine and another 'something special' has been lost. An e-mail or a text can never, as we now know so well, can never be private in the way that a letter is; and can never be as personal. It takes care and thought to write a letter which is not usually the case with an e-mail, where brevity and function are generally assets. The letter is personal in a way that electronic communication can not be. It is immediate but somehow remote too.

Paul recognised the need for a personal touch, putting his own name in his own hand as a final declaration of friendship. Something written, however illegible, communicates something that a key-board cannot.

If arguing for more letters to be written is as likely to succeed as Cnut's commands to the sea to turn away, perhaps a shout for cards might be heard above the tweeting. A card with an attractive picture yet blank inside allows just enough space to say something worthwhile without taxing the sender or the recipient; and it is personal. The ink has come from the pen I held in my hand.

Paul, had he lived in the present age would have used all the means open to him to communicate the Gospel with power. But he would also have written something with his own awkward hand to make sure people knew that it was him, expressing feelings that were real.