

Letter. 2 Corinthians 3.1-18. 16th Oct 2011.

HomeGroups.

Fabulously well done for meeting again. Really, I know it's not been easy these last couple of weeks and I hope that things increasingly settle down for you. Keep on the look out for people who don't know what group to be in. Apparently people do like to be asked.

Welcome:

What's the most encouraging thing you've said to someone this week / or has been said to you?

Worship: *try not to leave delegation of this slot until the end of this evening, do it now, even before you start it. I found it works best if I volunteer myself sooner than later, see if you can all take a turn before Christmas. Psalm 96.*

Word: *I found other translations helpful here, esp Message, NLT, youth bible.*

1. Read 2 Cor 3.
2. What struck you about this bible reading?
3. How might those first readers have felt about Paul calling them a "our letter"?
4. How comfortable are you with being a letter from Christ to the world?
5. Look at the Jer & Ezek quotes in the sermon text – why did I think Paul might be referring to them?
6. Read Ex34.29ff. How does this help?
7. How does reading OT help? Any suggestions on helping each other to read it?
8. Where do we see the veil today?
9. How does that veil get lifted away?
10. What's the One word that you will take away to give you something to mull over later on?

Works: Pray for the peace and unity of the Church, for a spirit of encouragement and joy. Thank you for your prayers regarding Youthwork, keep it up!

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I can still remember being very excited about reading the Parish Profile of Barcombe 11yrs ago. And I remember quickly cobbling a CV together to fax to the then Churchwardens. I also remember discovering very early on that the difference between the truth and the job description was about the same as the difference between me and my CV – so Alls fair ...

When a Church was looking for a new vicar I was asked to help out a little: I read all the CVs and the applications and they made me feel terribly small and inadequate. These men were all fabulous men of God, they walked on water and healed everyone, they wrote famous books with deep theological insight and led vast and expanding youth groups.

Letters of Recommendation. In Paul's day they were needed to know if you really were who you said you were – are you a genuine Christian, approved by the Church of Jerusalem? Or are you a fraud out for some money? And today we need them still – to prove our qualifications, to sell ourselves and show ourselves in the best possible light.

When I first read this bible reading I got a warm fuzzy feeling and I felt really enthused and encouraged. The marvellous poetry and metaphor that carries Paul away, the deep deep love that he has for these people, the pain that's in the background and yet the Paul is so proud of these people and then the glory,

the bigging up of the Old Testament if only as a way of emphasising the massive glory of Jesus and the gospel.

And the strong calm confidence that Paul has that this gospel is at work in us, changing us, filling us with more of the glory of God.

It's just fabulously encouraging stuff.

The problem is that I'm about to preach and in preaching I will try to unpick what Paul is saying and the problem is that poetry and passion don't always cope well with being unpicked.

It would be a bit like me giving you a spoonful of egg and then a spoonful of flour and then a spoonful of sugar as a way of inviting you to enjoy the cake!

But let's try anyway! The One word sermon is Letter. You are my letter says St Paul. I don't need a CV – you are my CV. If anyone wants to look at my ministry and see what kind of vicar I am then all he needs to do is to come here and look at you.

Paul has had real problems with these Christians – problems of sin and immaturity, of harsh words and distrust. Paul has tried saying the right thing, of visiting and it's backfired so right now he's staying away and maybe that's wise and for the best.

But still Paul is so proud of them – You yourselves are our letter.

We need to hear this sometimes. I'm so pleased that you are part of this church. I'm so proud of this Community and how we're growing.

Its wonderful when you say things like that to me, its wonderful when Bishop Wallace comes here and says things like that to me, it makes me walk tall and say Yes! God is good!

Last Monday / Tuesday I went for a Vicars' Sleepover – of course we call it a Spiritual Retreat – where we talked about things that worry us, things we're not sure if we're any good at, and so on. This year I was really struck by the deep deep love these vicars have for their churches. Not that all is well but that they really care and really love the sheep entrusted to their care. It was really touching and encouraging.

We don't say this enough to each other – I'm glad you're in this church, I'm glad we're in the same HG together (give that a couple of weeks perhaps!), I'm glad that we work the Sunday Groups together.

You are a letter from Christ. And that's really exciting and encouraging. And its not because you're perfect and that all is well and it doesn't mean that from time to time we don't get on each others wicks – it means that I see Christ in you and its exciting to be part of this same pilgrimage through this difficult life with you.

Paul is so proud of this Congregation despite? all their pain and history – its marvellous – there's a real deep love there.

You are a letter from Christ. Now that thought might scare you.

Sometimes when I'm trying to unpack certain phrases I have a go at changing some of the words to see what that does and then I come back to the original phrase – so:

You are a letter from the School – Okay well I remember that sort of talk as a school boy and that means that you are a walking advert for the school.

You are a letter from your parents – Hmm – that means that we can see in you the kind of upbringing that you've had – you look a bit like mum and dad and you act a bit like them too. That might be a scary thought for some of you and it might also be a slightly proud thought too – and, perhaps, rightly so.

So You are a letter from Christ – that means that when people want to know what Christ is like, what Jesus does in our lives, all they need to do is to read you, read your life.

That might sound a bit arrogant and it might sound equally “Oh my but I'm a terrible hypocrite! I must be a terrible letter!” Paul answers both of those by saying its not about you it's about God and the marvellous things that God has done in Jesus, for us and in us.

Paul says that his confidence, his competence, his hope and the boldness that comes from it – that all comes from God, through Jesus, in the Spirit. (Ooh if only it were Trinity Sunday! The wholeness of God involved in transforming little me into who God has made me and calls me to be!)

I am sorry, its not one of those practical sermons, I promise to preach one soon! This whole letter, so far, has been about grasping the goodness of what God has done for us

and as we grasp that truth it starts to have a deep impact on how we view ourselves and each other and our meaning and purpose in life.

So Chapter 1 – the one word sermon was Comfort – about the importance of receiving Comfort from God, letting Him draw alongside us, then Deposit – God's gift of His Holy Spirit to us, a down payment to make us certain that God does have a sure grip on our lives, then Aroma – how God is working his way through us, how we smell of God and now Letter –

If you'd like a practical message it would be – read more Old Testament – Paul's letters are soaked in OT references and allusions and throw away symbols or metaphors – so all this talk of Tablets makes us think of the Ten Commandments but there's also Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant (Jer 31.31?) and Ezekiel's too (Ez 36.26?).

Whilst you're busily worrying about the sort of letter you might be – there is another problem and it is the filter by which we read things. You send me an email and depending on my mood, my busyness, that will all affect how I read what you're saying.

We each of us view the world through our own tinted glasses, some of us have a rosier outlook, others wear darker shades. St Paul says that lots of people have this veil over their hearts – it affects what they see, how they see it and understand it and respond to it.

Paul takes us back to Ex34 to the 10 Commandments, Moses has had such a fabulous time with God that his face is just shining. Moses is radiating God. And in his hands Moses carries the 10 Commandments, the Law that will help you learn right from wrong, that will train your conscience and convict you of sin.

And Moses is so full of this encounter with God that the people find it a bit much and ask if he would please put a veil over his face so they did not have to deal with Moses face to face.

There's a sadness here – that the people didn't want to get that close to God, or that close to Moses, they wanted a barrier put in place

and the barrier seems to have stayed so now people have a veil over their hearts, a veil over their minds, and it affects how they see and understand what God has done in the world.

You know this, you've spoken to people about Church and how your faith is good for you and you quite like singing and reading the bible for yourself and others just don't get it.

Some respond aggressively and negatively – ah but what about dinosaurs and suffering! And others respond quite personally about how they once knew a Church goer who was horribly hypocritical or they knew a vicar who said No to their baby being baptised and so obviously God and the Church and Christianity are simply wrong.

This veil shapes their thinking and how they deal with life and its problems.

So there's a sadness here but Paul wants to point to a marvellous glory – because if we look at Moses and his shining veil and the effect that coming into close contact with the Law had on Moses – and think about how the purpose of the Law was to point out our sin

!- not to do anything with it, not to bring forgiveness and healing, not to help us fight temptation – but even still that glory that was on Moses was too much for them back then,

Well Now we have the Gospel and the Gospel is all about goodnews and God's help and a removal of sin and guilt and the Holy Spirit in us to guide us and transform us.

If you're impressed at the glory that shone from Moses (and you should be) then get ready to be awesomely impressed with the glory that is on us through Jesus.

We are like mirrors shining out for all the world to see and this divine light shines in us and changes us increasingly to the person God has made us and calls us to be.

Others in the world may wear a veil over their hearts or minds, and that won't make it easy for them to read you, but God is there ready to take the veil away the moment they want to respond to Jesus.

When I'm doing a wedding rehearsal I always ask the bride, quietly, if she has a veil and when she would like to lift the veil – there are three options – on arrival at the chancel step before the service really begins, Or when I pronounce them husband and wife, Or in 40years time!

The good news is that veils are thin. That you can see something through them. And if I may mix my metaphors from last week – we are not just a letter, we are also an aroma, and aromas have a way of getting underneath the veil!

But today, we are a Letter. You are a letter from God. Not written like a tattoo, ink on skin but rather written by divine light, by the Holy Spirit deep inside of you, so that you shine out in the darkness.

Yes even you, even me, with our doubts and our hypocrisies and our mistakes – We are a walking talking letter of recommendation from Jesus to the world. And I'm glad that you're here. Amen.