

Hello everyone

Communication can sometimes feel a bit strange can't it? Maybe some of you are like me and remember the weekly hand written letter to your parents from university or school.

Often just dashed off without really a thought to how they would be feeling as they read it. I found a couple of mine recently and enjoyed a detailed accounts of things that can have had virtually no interest to my parents at all.

But now possible those days of writing letters have mainly gone; e-mail and various social media platforms are normal today. While there was a style even a format to writing letters, when it comes to e-mails and social media the approved styles are completely different. It seems that everyone who writes an e-mail has their own style, although I am told they fall into four general categories.

But when it comes to communication that is what the church is all about.

Spreading the good news.

And in the New Testament, we read of Paul, one of the great voices used to spread the good news.

Paul – a missionary, pastor and theologian who we always see moving from place to place and writing letters to churches that he founde.

When you look at his journeys, he has three main centres; Antioch, Ephesus, from which he writes many of his letters and rather strangely Rome.

Why these places? Antioch and Ephesus fair enough- he had churches there, but why Rome? He didn't start a church in Rome. The letter he wrote, the one we call Romans, contains a lot of his ideas about being a Christian, but not all of them.

Maybe it is as simple as he was writing to a group of Christians at the centre of the known world.

Rome at the time when Nero had just become emperor.

His vision of the nature of the Christian faith came at a crucial point when Christianity was in the process of changing from a group within Judaism reacting to the culture and government of the world into a group

within the Greek and Roman Society poised to go beyond even that and become a world religion.

So we can see why Paul might feel moved to write a letter to Rom, the centre of it all.

Within his letter, he writes of Christian faith as a blend of three components of his life. His Judaism, his knowledge of Greek culture and his distinctive Christian experience that developed from an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Out of this he fashions one whole view of Christianity which we can see unfolding if we study his letters in our New Testament.

But how does he do this?

And what does it mean for us today as we read his letters in a completely different setting?

Letters were a very important way of communicating back the and understanding how they were written is like understanding the different way communicate by e-mail today.

It tells us something of their personality and also helps us understand the message the carry.

It turns out that writing letters in the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived was a bout following a set pattern.

A template we might call it as we bring up a new word document. Paul however modifies the standard template just as we do sometimes today as we sit down to type a document.

Luckily, there are lots of examples of ancient letters that have survived that allow us to see just how common the template was.

We also have one personal letter written by Paul to Philemon which can help us see how he tweaked the usual template to bring out his Christian beliefs.

If we look at the start of a typical Greek letter, we find The name of the sender, the name of the recipient and then a greeting followed by a prayer to god - perhaps thanking him for a safe journey.

Paul enlarges the greeting from a simple one word to a grace

Grace and peace from the God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

His prayer then becomes a prayer for others rather than himself. I thank God always when I remember you in my prayers.

Then we get the central points of the letter.

Remember though when Paul writes his letter to the Romans, he was writing to people he didn't really know even though he had obviously heard of them.

What would you do in that case?

Well Paul at the start when he is mentioning his name sets out his credentials. As to why he may be able to help out in the mission at Rome.

But it seems that not all the people in Rome used the word church because unlike his other letters, he does not include the word church in the address to his letter.

He in fact uses three different expressions all that we might translate as church.

The called of Jesus Christ

To those in Rome beloved of God

And the called saints.

He then offers a prayer of thanksgiving which like his other letters includes I remember you, but also I am longing to see you and why?

So that we may be mutually encouraged by each others faith.

It's a marvellous reminder to all of us to remember how the person to whom we are writing will receive our letters.

A reminder that people in Gravesend may not be that interested in the price of baked beans in a shop in St Andrews and were probably more interested in what I was actually doing in the lecture theatre.

Paul doesn't know the Romans, although he knows of them.

He sets out his credentials and outlines what he'd like to and then he goes on to speak of how he is hoping to build a mutually beneficial encouraging relationship through debate and sharing of ideas.

As with so much of Paul's writings it is about attitudes and how we see each other, how we treat each other and God.

And we may not be great letter writers, reaching for the thick cream paper and a fountain pen to spend an afternoon writing a carefully constructed letter to a good friend or someone we encountered recently, but we can read the greetings Paul starts his letters with and allow noy jus this words to sink into our minds and flow out through our behabviour towards others.

We can also allow his use of words and style of writing to remind us that the success of any message we want to send resides in the way someone responds to it.

What do you make of that?

Peace be with you

Amen