

What I say 3 times is true

2 Timothy 1:1-14 Luke 16:19-31

Rev J Shannon

My cousin Jane is an old-fashioned girl. She likes to write letters which is the only civilised way to exchange ideas. She might send me a 1 sentence email with a link attached to some article but our real conversations take place on paper - 4 weeks apart.¹

My Dad was an executive so he was used to dictating letters. He used a Dictaphone from the very first day it was invented and he would dictate his letters to me amongst his other daily correspondence. An anonymous secretary would type them up and sign them so it was not unusual to get a letter sealed with the salutation, 'cordially yours, MMR'. Not as endearing as Paul's greeting, "I am grateful to God whom I worship with a clear conscious ...when I remember you constantly in my prayers...". When his secretary was absent, I'd just get the tape in the mail including the notations, "Dear Jean", "comma", "new paragraph" etc.

When my mother lost her sight, we continued our correspondence on cassette tapes. (Remember those?) A couple of days after my dad died, my step-mom asked me to clear out his desk. There, in the bottom drawer, was every letter and tape I had ever sent in my whole life. The letters began in 1968 when I went to boarding school. The audios from 1974-1989 after which international phone calls became affordable and fax and emails took over. The letters and tapes documented my wonder during my travels and my daily discoveries in this new country. They recorded my failures and successes and documented my son's deepening voice and changing obsessions. My Dad was a good correspondent and I had almost daily faxes which were just a line or two about life.²

The phone calls were regular as well. My Dad was an extrovert so when his wife was out of town and there was no one to talk to, he would ring all his children. Eventually, I had to buy my father an international clock so he would stop calling me at 3am. How I miss those calls.

What will our children be left? How fortunate we are to be able to read Paul's letter today. How utterly amazing.

¹ Yes, the US Postal system is so broken, it takes 4 weeks for a letter to get here. When I arrived in Oz in 1970, an aerogramme only took 2 weeks.

² I've kept them.

But more than records have been lost. We've lost the art of grace and generosity in our writing. We have lost the art of persuasion. But perhaps that is an old story...

In the Rich man and Lazarus story, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers and Abraham says, they didn't listen to Moses or the prophets so why would they listen to a ghost? Actually, the words are closer to 'why would they listen to someone risen from the dead?' which has an even more pointed meaning, if you get my drift.

Communication has always been a problem. Communicating orally is becoming extinct. I read this week that Gen Z don't answer their phones. The only ones they call or answer the phone for are their parents – because they have to. (In Boarding school, there was time set aside where we *had* to write to our parents – even if we didn't want to – now, it's the obligation to pick up the phone) Today, almost all young people's communication takes place on social media, much of it in abbreviations or emojis... Which is not a place for deep and meaningful or philosophical conversations.

This is one of the underlying factors in the outbreak of school absenteeism.³ If half or a third of your school years have been at home where you can mute your mic or camera, play games on your lap, text your friends. There is nothing appealing about sitting in a classroom in rows, marching to assembly or being under the watchful eye of a teacher with the ability to snatch your phone out of your hands. Students are craving the freedom that separation brings. In the real world, if you say something nasty to the person next to you, there are consequences. The NSW Education Department is bringing in behaviour advisors. The kids are not developing social and communication skills that prepare them for dealing with real people living in a REAL world.

Language is so important that John Squires put an article in this week's Presbytery news. He said,
"It shapes and defines the relationships we have with each other and with God. We use language to express feelings, convey information and inspire action. ...

Whenever we use words, we would do well to choose the words we use in a way that considers the audience and communicates in a way which doesn't alienate part of the community. Careful language is precise."⁴

³ According to newspaper reports, on any given day up to 30% of students don't show up

⁴ He goes on to say careless language can hurt – and boy can it, speaking from experience. The Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church in Western Australia (which Elizabeth and I used to belong to) has produced a very useful guide to careful, inclusive language. You can download it from

There is no doubt Paul chose his words *very* carefully.

When I was doing my Uniting Church studies, my supervisor recommended Andrew Dutney's book that consolidated the letters exchanged by the Elders of the time, discussing, debating and modifying the shape and basis of beliefs that would become the Basis of Union and the Uniting Church in Australia.

What struck me was the depth, the grace and generosity exposed in correspondence that took days to deliver and came from gentlemen (and yes, they were all men) miles apart structurally and theologically. Slowly, slowly, they argued, responded and counter-responding until they met on common ground which was always based on scripture, not opinion.

Their rigour in emulating the structure, grace and thoughtfulness presented in Paul's letters is only evident to me now as a more mature and learned reader.

Paul's letter, or the writer of Paul's letter, is subtle and gentle in his communication but there are some key points we should not miss. First, the mention of growing up in the faith. Naming both Timothy's grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice, places the importance of women as central in the formation of faith and of the church. Second, it demonstrates that this faith didn't just pop up yesterday as the Romans would have you believe. It has an inter-generational history. Subtle, but an important political point. It appears here because the writer knew no letter was private in the day and the point would leach out to a wider community. This was no fly-by-night cult.

Most of all, this is a pastoral and encouraging letter. It translates failure (being imprisoned and forgotten by many) as suffering – suffering as a privilege to share with Jesus. Many saw Paul's incarceration as a sign of weakness and the failure of the disciples. It was embarrassing but here it is being translated into something Holy and necessary and not to be afraid of.⁵

Paul is passing the mantel onto Timothy as a new leader willing to pick up where he has left off. This letter, gently insists that suffering may well be a mantel for all who follow Christ.

Here is an ancient letter speaking down through the millennia with a clarity and a kindness even our 21st century filters cannot disguise.

So how can we do it today? John Squires reminds us that we can choose language that does not offend. We have to learn new phrases that seem awkward at first but eventually become natural. Like Chair, instead of chairman; farmer instead on man

<https://unitingforpeacewa.org.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/watch-your-language-revised-2022-4.pdf>

⁵ see earlier sermon where good things come from bad

on the land – and using ‘their’ to leave phrases open to anyone...for example, A Christian puts *their* faith in the Lord.

We can be careful and intentional about our communication. For example, complaining is just spreading viral misery. Without thinking we can be ‘blame-throwers’. Flaming other people with guilt rather than looking inside ourselves.

Julian Treasure uses the acronym HAIL to describe his positive communications approach. He said he liked the acronym because the dictionary defined “hail” as “to greet or acclaim enthusiastically”. H-A-I-L stands for:

Honesty – do I need to describe that?

Authentic – standing in your own truths

Integrity – be your word

Love –Start from a position where you wish the other well.

There is no evidence that either the rich man or Lazarus practiced this process. Perhaps the rich man should re-think his approach. It is clear in the letter to Timothy. There is nothing but good-will, love and best wishes. If only we started every communication with the best interests of the other person right from the start, what a world that would be!

Finally, don’t just take my word for it. Communications theory says if you hear something from 3 different sources you will believe not only is it true but that *everybody* agrees. So go and read the letter again, google good communications and watch a TED talk...and see what happens when you start a conversation with the best interests of the other in mind.

I pray: Lord, help me make my language clearer, kinder and more inclusive so that your word breaks through, gently. Amen