



The Bible as Literature

The Epistles

20 November 2016

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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7 *Philippians 1: 1-8*

'My Hand will Write what my Heart Dictates...'

Introduction

When was the last time you wrote a letter – a fully-fledged letter, observing all the epistolary conventions – rather than firing off a quick email, text, whatsapp or messaging a friend? (Some of you may even be doing that right now!) Probably, if you write letters at all, they are more formal ones – requesting essay extensions or suspensions, or perhaps a covering letter accompanying a CV or reference. Gone are the days when the post office regularly used to issue first editions of new lines in stamps and children loved to collect stamps from exotic locations to place them carefully into their stamp albums. Our electronic communication – usually as short and succinct as possible – has relegated the letter to near extinction. Yet until recently, people often crafted exquisite personal correspondence. They consulted handbooks on letter writing techniques, and wrote leisurely, expansively and creatively. Think of some of the great collections of letters that have afforded us insights into the lives, times, politics and events of other eras. The world would be a poorer place without collections of letters from people like Lords Nelson and Byron, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Emmeline Pankhurst, or Anne Frank.

The majority of the books in the New Testament are letters. Out of the twenty-seven books in the canon, at least twenty are pieces of correspondence.¹ The New Testament writers employed rhetorical skill and craft in composing their letters. Paul's letter to the Philippians is known as a letter of friendship and we can see here that Paul opens his letter in the conventional way according to the pattern of ancient letter-writing. These conventions show us that this is a letter to friends – friends 'whom he knew personally and whom he knew were facing particular problems of faith and life.'² It is likely that Paul wrote this epistle when he was chained to a soldier-jailor while under house arrest in Rome. Here, Paul openly expresses his love, affection and yearning for them in this opening greeting.

¹ K. Keefer, *The New Testament as Literature, A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP 2008), 52.

² G. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, (Word: Dallas 1983), 3.

Just as Paul can openly express his love and affection in this letter of friendship back in the first century, I would now like us to consider some other letters in a similar genre of friendship and encouragement from a much later era. These are letters written by 'missionary wives' to Aotearoa/NZ in the nineteenth century. These were British women, who left home and family and endured a three-month perilous boat journey to the other side of the world as missionaries of the Church Mission Society (CMS). These women were prolific writers of letters, journals and diaries. They wrote letters to encourage, letters to exhort, letters to describe their environment, letters to request advice, letters to complain, letters to vent their frustrations and irritations, letters to express their feelings and emotions, letters to rejoice in and also lament their vocation, letters to love and to be loved. One has the impression, upon reading their letters, that it is these relationships sustained through letter-writing, more than anything else, which sustained and nurtured these women throughout their time in New Zealand. Just as the prophet Jeremiah exhorted the exiles to seek the settle down and to seek the prosperity of the city, so these women were finding comfort and companionship through their letter writing.

I would like to introduce you to two such letter writers, Anne Wilson who travelled to New Zealand from Jersey and Kate Hadfield who was born in New Zealand of CMS missionary parents.

Anne Catherine Wilson (1802–38)

Anne had experienced a definite missionary calling and it was under her 'gentle influence' that her husband John came to this vocation also. There are many journal entries which express her quite explicit sense of vocation and her awareness that God had given her a task to fulfil: 'Many things have lately combined to make one feel more desirous to go to the poor heathen. The more I hear of them the more my heart seems drawn to them.'³ However, her belief in this strong vocation to make Christ known mingled with inner feelings of personal inadequacy and spiritual frailty plagued Anne all her life. These sentiments were a constant refrain: 'An anxious Christian, is it possible? Oh what a faithless creature I am, what a contradiction I appear to myself.'⁴ Anne longed to be a Christian who was full of faith and able to be a joyful witness to God but so often she found herself anxious, burdened and weak and therefore unable to witness to God as she desired.

Separation and the resultant feelings of isolation and loneliness were a major concern of many missionary wives. Anne felt the separation from family and friends in England but it was separation from her husband that she found especially hard to bear and at times intolerable. John was often absent – travelling to various Maori villages to act as peacemaker or evangelist. She wrote openly and honestly to her husband of how she longed to be with him: 'I should not sit up so late if you were here to keep me company but it is sweeter to me to sit scribbling to you than to go to bed.'⁵ Anne deeply loved her husband and she continually struggled with this internal conflict between her love for her husband combined with fears for his safety and this missionary vocation and duty to which they had been called. On another occasion, Anne wrote imploring him to return:

³ Anne Catherine Wilson, 'Letters and Journal of Anne Catherine Wilson/collected, edited and transcribed by MG Armstrong', (Alexander Turnbull Library: MS-Papers-3943, 1832–38)

⁴ Ibid., 1836.

⁵ Ibid., nd.

My heart within me is desolate. I know my love will say – ah my Anne why are you so unthankful, have you not your children? are you not with kind friends? Ah yes, but what are friends compared to you my love? and who ought to share most in your troubles but me... Forgive me my love for dwelling on this, my hand will write what my heart dictates, though I fear my tears will render all unintelligible.⁶

In the original of this letter, located in the Alexander Turnbull Library archives in Wellington, there is, in fact, a blot over this last sentence – perhaps one of her tears making it unintelligible? Anne was not only a woman with profound missionary convictions, nurtured in Victorian evangelical piety, but she was also a woman who loved her husband immensely. She wrote, 'I feel when I write to you as though, and indeed you are, part of myself.'⁷

John too found the partings painful, as he noted in 1836, when Anne and the children had to evacuate the mission station because of marauding war parties:

Whether we shall ever meet again... I know not, yet may we cheerfully and patiently submit to His will, and whatever becomes of me, may God's richest blessings and mercy rest upon my dear wife and my dear little boys. There are pains more bitter than death.⁸

Ultimately Anne only lived and served in New Zealand for five years. She died at the age of 36, probably of breast cancer. She was a woman unafraid to reveal her soul. She emerges as a woman with her own vocation and her own experience of Christ, which she was eager to share with others. She was also a woman who was honest in expressing the hardship and inner struggle that this vocation engendered. Hers was not an easy calling – and she did not pretend that it was. The high privilege of serving God in New Zealand was lived, experienced and expressed in the hardship of daily routine but she was not overcome and her trust in God held steadfast to the end.

Catherine (Kate) Hadfield (1831–1902)

In contrast to Anne, Kate was born in New Zealand, the daughter of CMS missionaries, and lived a long life. She even visited England twice during her lifetime. She too was a prolific letter writer. She and her husband, Octavius had ten children. So Kate was not only a busy mother but she was also fully involved in the mission work of teaching and education. She too wrote personal letters but, in contrast to Anne, her most influential letters were of a different kind. She wrote letters imploring for justice. Her letters were letters of advocacy to the government against the flagrant injustice of the land sales of Maori land which led to a war in Taranaki. Fluent in the Maori language, she helped local Maori formulate and translate a petition to the government and she stood by her husband as he endured a four and a half hour grilling about these land sales, known as 'Taranaki question' in the House of Representatives. Her husband wrote to his brother, 'I was almost alone in the country when I raised my voice against the Governor's unjust and mad conduct

⁶ Ibid., 1837.

⁷ Ibid., Puriri, nd.

⁸ Ibid., 13 May 1836.

at Taranaki.⁹ In 1996, the Waitangi Tribunal, a Commission instituted to investigate land claims, found that the Governor at the time, Governor Thomas Gore Browne, whose brother had been Norrisian Professor of Divinity at Cambridge at the time, along with certain officers were liable for civil and criminal charges for their actions in starting this war. Kate's active involvement in politics and advocacy, enacted through her letter and pamphlet writing, was unusual for missionary wives at that time. She upheld the rights of the local Maori and was not afraid to fight against injustice through letter, pamphlets and petitions. Over one hundred years later, her efforts along with those of her husband were vindicated.

Conclusion

Letter writing has a long and proud heritage. Here we have discovered both personal letters where the women were writing to share their lives, their friendship, their hopes and dreams as well as letters of activism and advocacy – letters intended to make a difference in the world. Without the genre of the letter, our Scriptures would be eviscerated, and our literary landscape would be emptied of depth and perspective. Paul's letters of friendship, encouragement and correction are instructive for our lives as contemporary Christians. These letters of Anne, Kate and many others like them offer us a glimpse of other worlds, of lives lived in faith and trust, and provide for us a mirror in which to reflect on our own lives and journeys of faith, discipleship and growth.

⁹ Barbara Macmorran, *Octavius Hadfield*, (Wellington: David F Jones Ltd 1971), 105 & 109.