

Address to the Christmas Function of the Lawyers Christian Fellowship December 2005 delivered by His Honour Justice Peter Young QC.

LETTERS

First can I thank the organisers of tonight for this invitation to give the address. I felt honoured to receive the invitation at least until I heard on my grapevine that some had thought that I had not done so previously. In fact this is the third time I have been afforded the honour in the last twenty years or so. I hope if I happen to say anything worthwhile tonight, someone might remember it.

I thought that I would speak to you tonight about letters. The word has a number of meanings, so I should explain that I am mostly speaking about correspondence received through the mail, though, me being me, I may deviate.

One comes into contact with the letter at a very early age. Or one did before email was invented.

I still prefer to receive letters. It is a joke round the court that I only open my email during the month of August, but, if I am overseas, then I postpone it until the following August. I do, however, open ordinary mail almost daily.

Do you remember the first letter you received? I don't know whether it was my first, but I do remember that on one occasion when I was about 4, my grandmother who was staying with us posted a letter addressed to me personally. She, of course, watched me open it and, I think I was advanced enough to read her printing. It was all about how great it was to receive my own letter. Grandma probably got as much pleasure out of it as I did!

Today I receive a large bulk of letters each week. Most of them cause no joy.

Especially at this time of year one receives a mass of what I call Gimme letters from charities. These are getting bolder. To exaggerate only slightly, I recently received one like this,

Dear The (I should explain that computers like writing to people by their first names. A letter to the Hon Mr Justice Young can be addressed to “The” though more advanced computers say, Dear Hon”). Most computers adjusted for multiculturalism recognize “The” as a common name in Northern Thailand.

I’ll continue, Dear The, You must be really stupid if you do not recognize that the Home for abused ferrets is the most needy charity in Australia. I require and demand that you sent us more than your usual \$100 this year and I require it no later than 25 November”.

Of coursed most of our mail is routine, bills and advertising matter. However, I must tell you before I finish this introductory waffle that I actually received a nice letter this week. It was from a silk who had taken the time to write and tell me how much he enjoyed my columns in the Australian Law Journal. When everyone is so busy, one really appreciates, a person who has taken time to tell you that he or she appreciates what one is doing.

OK, now let me pass to more meaty material.

What were you doing last Michaelmas.

Probably few know when Michaelmas was, and those that do, can’t remember what they were doing. I remember what I was doing I can say proudly.

(By the way, have you noticed how the spin doctors have been able to rehabilitate the old deadly sin of pride to the new esteemed virtue of self esteem?)

Last Michaelmas, I had to leave the court at lunchtime and get to the airport to fly to Brisbane for the inauguration of our new Primate of

the Anglican Church of Australia, Dr Phillip Aspinall. lucky me had been nominated, to represent the laity of the church to promise allegiance to the new Primate.

Last Michaelmas was a very windy day and all the aeroplanes were delayed. As I result, I had just time to have the taxi stop for me to drop my bags and pay my bill in advance at the airport motel and then crawl through the peak hour traffic to St Johns Cathedral in Brisbane.

Anyhow, I got there and proceeded to robe. The Dean had organized things in proper order. As one walked down the corridor of St Martin's House next to the cathedral, where we were to robe, there were notices for all sorts and conditions of men and women to robe, Choir robing was an early sign and then signs in ranking order, canons' robing, archdeacon's robing, bishop's robing, archbishop's robing and there right at the end, right where you would expect it, judge's and lawyer's robing.

I went as the notice directed and then seated relaxed in his chair was the dean, the very reverend John Parkes.

John some of you may remember was a barrister who lived at East Roseville. He went to the College of Ministry in Canberra where he was much loved, not the least reason for which was his ability to secure acquittals of any theological student who happened to have to appear before the magistrate,

John is doing a great work in Brisbane. The early service in St Johns is being held in the main cathedral again as the numbers have increased to the extent that it can no longer fit in the choir stalls. Our main fear is that someone will make John a bishop!

There were other prominent lawyers in the procession. Chief Justice Paul de Jersey, the Chancellor of the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane, was acting governor, so he occupied the Governor's stall. However, Justice Debra Mullins of the Queensland Supreme Court, the Deputy

Chancellor was robed near me as was Bill Anderssen, solicitor, the previous deputy chancellor.

I picked up the usual order of service and order of procession. Showing who goes where and when. The space in front of me in the procession was marked "Free". I thought that unusual, or perhaps because of my bulk I was being given two spaces, until I spied my Friend the Rev Canon Marion Free, Rector of Toowong, and as one does, I adjusted the hood of her cope as we waited in procession. My sheet told me to let all the others turn off to the right at the sanctuary steps, to wend my way through the choir to the high altar and then turn right into the nearest stall. Although a Sydney church leader told me recently that there was no such thing as a high altar, I knew what was meant, "high", of course, is merely the old English word for "main."

The service was interesting both musically and for the preaching. Archbishop Phillip gave one of the best sermons I have heard him give, As it was Michaelmas, and the lesson was on St Michael as he is featured in the Book of Revelation, the sermon was on the dragons of evil that lie in wait to trap Christians.

After the service was the public welcome. After a long service, my eyes started to wander. I was in one of the canon's stalls in the cathedral looking North across the aisle through the sanctuary. There, above the south set of canon's stalls was some ornate carved woodwork and there, caught in that woodwork, about a metre above an ordinary person's reach, was a letter.

How tragic, I thought. God has sent that letter all the way from heaven and it has got within a metre of being able to be read but it has stopped just there. As far as I know, it is still there. I really wonder what God wanted to say.

A couple of analogous situations leaped into my mind. One was the time a couple of Victorian barristers came to Sydney to be admitted to our bar. This was necessary last century. They braved their way to

Tullaramine, through the skies to Sydney, their robes were actually there at the baggage collection conveyor belt. They got through Sydney traffic and reached Wentworth Chambers where they were to robe 40 minutes before the appointed time. They were still caught in a lift between the seventh and eighth floors of Wentworth Chambers when the ceremony finished.

Or again, remember, in the film, *Dead Poet's Society*, where the pukka boys' school is in chapel and the phone rings. A boy answers it and calls out to the Headmaster, "It's for you Sir, It's God."

I believe God is always sending us messages. Often those messages come to us through circumstances. Thus, by chance a teacher might see a television program about education in Tanzania. He may go to a party where a Tanzanian missionary is in attendance and they chat. Then he receives a letter from the Bishop of Tanzania asking whether he would join an expert committee to set up a better education system in Tanzania.

Messages are sent through prayer. Prayer isn't just talking its listening to God as well. I don't know about you, but sometimes as I'm praying, a quiet voice will say, better pray for so and so as well. However, the best story I recently heard about the power of prayer to give a message from God is the little boy who did not have his library bag at school and who had reasonable grounds to believe that dire consequences would befall anyone who did not have their library bag at library period that day. He earnestly prayed that there would not be a library period that day. God heard and answered his prayer. The headmaster came into the classroom to tell the class that there would be no library period that day as the librarian was sick. The boy felt terribly guilty that his prayer had made the librarian sick and he prayed for her speedy recovery. Did not God in that incident send a message to that boy about prayer?

Of course the most potent way that God sends his messages to us is through scripture.

How often do we visit homes with bibles on the shelves. God's word is there just like that letter above the canon's stalls in Brisbane Cathedral. God has sent his word, but it is still a metre out of reach.

There are others who read it, but do not get the message for a number of reasons. One reason is that the method of accessing the message is wrong. In one of PG Wodehouse's books, there is a group of sincere young men who wish to use the Bible to govern their lives and pick out a verse at random as their guidance for the day. This is quite useless. Indeed if one tries it one either finds a verse in Hosea or Habakkuk as those books are about the middle of the Bible's bulk or else the book opens at a very well read passage.

A far more dangerous attitude is only to read that part of the Bible with which you agree or to read it on the basis that the bits that don't fit your philosophy of life are no longer of authority. We are unlikely to be receiving God's message if we do this or focus on key texts. The Bible is to be read as a whole.

I was not impressed by the movement in the Anglican Church in Sydney no longer to read the complete Bible in church over a three year cycle, but to read the passages on which the preacher was preaching. As many preachers have a very limited repertoire, this does not allow God to speak to us through the whole of scripture. God has delivered his message, the Bible is there in the church, but the message might be as accessible as that letter in Brisbane.

There is one other thought about letters in scripture which I must briefly deal and then close. St Paul in writing to the Corinthians in the book we call 2 Corinthians chapter 3. Paul is slinging off against those visiting evangelists who have come to Corinth with piles of letters of recommendation. Paul does not keep such a collection. He tells the Corinthian Christians that he does not need to do so, because they are his letters of recommendation. He says in 3:3, "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human heart.

We are the letters that God is sending to his world. We lawyers have probably more opportunities than most people to influence the lives of others. God often is sending us to people, but we often are as useless as that letter in Brisbane. Let us use the opportunities that we are given sensibly to steer others to the full knowledge of Christ and full participation in his church.

Letters: we can't live without them. As Christmas approaches, we will be receiving letters and cards from those friends we have not seen face to face for a while. Letters of goodwill. May I conclude by wishing all the Christian letters here this evening all the very best for Christmas and a happy and productive 2006.