

A Letter to a Friend

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year C

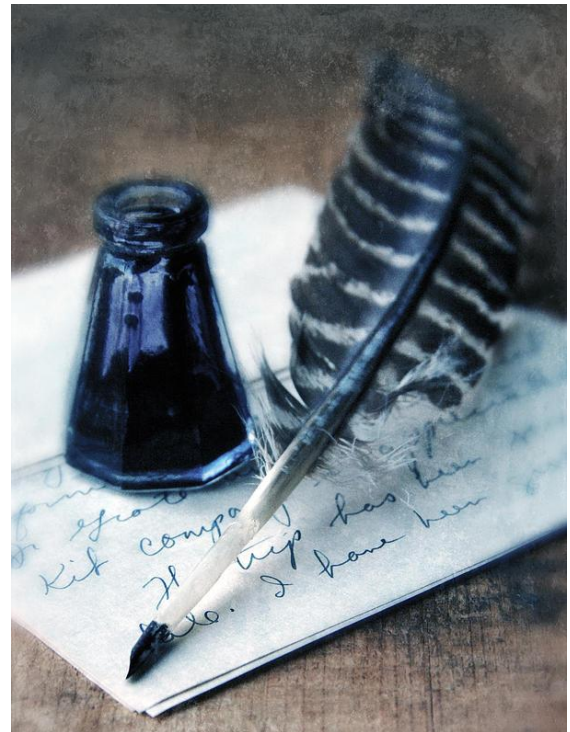
Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10
Psalms 19:8, 9, 10, 15

1 Corinthians 12:12-30
Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

Everyone loves to receive letters from family and friends. Every Christmas Season I enjoy receiving cards wishing me the joys and happiness of the season. Some include a letter that constitutes, more or less, a year in review for that person or family. In the case of priests, these letters (more often than not going into great detail and printed in very small font) usually begin with detailed comments about the season we are celebrating, making me chuckle as I begin reading my copy of what I have begun to refer to as their "annual Christmas Epistle to the Colossians". In the case of one very good friend, this year's Christmas letter took up four pages!

Throughout Scripture we see various examples of letters. Some written by prophets of the Old Testament, such as the letters sent by Jeremiah, and his companion Baruch, to the Jewish people already in exile in Babylon. In the New Testament we find the letters written by Peter, Paul and John to the early Christian communities.

Even St. Luke, one of the four Evangelists, presents his gospel account in the form of a letter. Both the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles begin with the author addressing his work to a friend, the "most excellent Theophilus" (Lk 1:3), whose identity is the subject of much scholarly speculation. Some suggest that Theophilus was the financial patron who sponsored Luke's writing of the Gospel for a more general



audience, and that Luke's cover letter to his patron was incorporated into the body of the text. Some even suggest Theophilus was Luke's publisher. Be that as it may, the finished product of Luke's writing indicate a letter which presents a narrative of great beauty; the result of Luke's theological reflection on the life, ministry and mystery of Jesus, which reveals his remarkably deep faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

Within any newspaper or magazine the "Letters to the Editor" is often a favorite section for readers. These letters express a wide range of sentiment and opinion, as well as varying degrees of writing styles and

Gospel of Luke: A Letter to Theophilus

talents.

We priests, too, are accustomed to receiving letters and e-mails from those we serve; usually complaints (almost never from someone with the courage to speak to us in person), but occasionally they are complimentary, from people who wish to express their appreciation. However, every now and then, we receive a letter from a parishioner or friend, in which one can read and feel the deep faith from which the person writes. Such letters do not seek to admonish, criticize, or even to agree or disagree.

Rather, they share how the writer's faith has been stirred by something we or someone else said or did - a homily preached, a visit paid, a class taught - or simply the manner in which we performed our duties - being present to them in some way, shape or form. Such letters seek not to blatantly boost our own egos, so as to butter us up and make us pat ourselves on the back for our inspirational brilliance. Rather they are a sincere sharing of deep faith, and how each of us being present to one another and nurturing of one another within our parishes continues to stir that faith, making it real and alive.

These are the letters worth reading over and over again. A reminder that we as priests, while called to *serve* the people, nonetheless stand with them as people of faith, all on a journey as we grow closer to our God. Luke shared this in the letter to his friend, the "most excellent Theophilus". Jeremiah and Baruch wrote so as to lift up in

faith a people so deeply demoralized by exile. Paul shared it in a letter to his friend Philemon, and in letters to the many communities with which he was so closely associated.

While we are accustomed to hearing a sermon or homily in which the faith is preached, while we may find joy in hearing faith expressed in song, it is a different experience of our shared faith when we see it expressed in writing, whether proclaimed as Holy Scripture in our liturgies and prayer services, as reflections written by great

saints, or simple letters from friends and parishioners, sharing how much that faith means to them.

Perhaps we might consider as a personal resolution, writing positive notes of gratitude to those who nurture

our growth through thoughtful sharing of their faith; letters that speak of how faith is stimulated and deepened by the worship and ministry of the Church and its workers. Then as we continue to come together to hear and proclaim we will have the resolve to express and share our faith, not a bitterness born of anger and resentment, but in gratitude born of mercy; and by a growth and expression of faith born and nurtured by reading widely and writing wisely.

Fr. Bill Nicholas
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