

On Saint Paul and his Letters

I began an essay on the art of letter writing and the decline of a whole body of splendid literature. I based my thesis on the fact that the traditional needs of writing derive from distance. Until the middle of the last century there were no other options. The telephone, telegraph, facsimile, e-mail, low cost travel by air has made the need to communicate by carefully crafted essays obsolete, I theorized. So in a mood of mourning, I turned to examples of excellence in letters. St. Paul came to mind.

I read for the first time all of the Epistles and a few of the apocrypha. Of course I had heard quotes from the pulpit; I had read snippets or comments taken entirely out of context to illustrate the particular axe the quoter had in mind. I was amazed to realize that I had never read them from beginning to end.

What I discovered that they are not letters at all. They are advertisements. Paul was the greatest public relations person in the history of Christianity. Even though many of the Epistles are acknowledged by experts as fragments glued together, Saint Paul was deserving of his canonization in much the same fashion that there are lifetime achievement awards for brilliance in cinema.

The Acts of the Apostles gives us the only known information about Paul aside from his Epistles. Talk about a man possessed. He was stoned to death....and survived. As I read them I came to the conclusion that this was a very lonely man. There is almost nothing that reveals the person. He never mentions family, loved ones, women friends or lovers.

Even the four Gospels are more ambiguous and far more interesting concerning the humanity of Jesus. Mary Magdalene? Washing his feet with perfume with her hair? Jesus seems human now and again. Jesus weeps. Jesus despairs. Jesus is passionate. Jesus is tempted. Jesus curses God. One can only imagine his embrace of Lazarus, stinking after days in the tomb.

Nothing like this leaks through to the persona of Paul. Never. His conversion pervades everything he does, everything he says. The “dazzling light” is the instrument of his evangelism. He spent more time in jail than Nelson Mandela. He is an apologist of the very highest order. He talks himself out of one scrape after the other. He would have made a very formidable adversary to Socrates

himself and the temptation to make up a fictitious dialogue between the two of them is compelling.

And I am going to quote out of context, making me as guilty of my own axe as those I am criticizing.

To the Romans:

“Let love be without pretense. Hate what is evil. Love one another with fraternal charity, anticipating one another with honor.” This is as close as Paul gets to anything personal and this is very impersonal.

And at the end of this great Epistle, he gives a litany of accolades reminiscent of academy awards. “But I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is in the ministry of the church at Cenchræ....greet Prisca and Aquila, my helpers in Christ Jesus.....greet my beloved Epaenetus who is the first fruits of Asia to Christ....greet Mary...greet Andronicus and Junias....” And so on.

From Corinthians:

“I write these things not to put you to shame, but to admonish you as my dearest children.”

He talks about virginity, always a female attribute. He thinks that women shouldn't speak in church.

Holy kisses conclude Corinthians. This is the most cerebral of saints. And he doesn't like women. Ephesians confirm this. Even slaves are enjoined to obey their masters under some convoluted interpretation of the law.

From the letters to the Colossians and later the Thessalonians: “Greetings, prayer, obedience and charity.”

Enough. Paul is the complete package. Only Helena, the mother of Constantine, was more influential than Paul in promoting Christianity, but what is left of his writings depict him as a traveling salesman. I would not aspire to meet this militant of Christ. He evidently inspired followers. He was the consummate organizer. He pounded his messages over and over. But as a human being, he was one dimensional, uninteresting and outrageously sexist.

With the Thessalonians, “And may the Lord of peace himself give you everlasting peace in every place. The Lord be with you all.”

I believe this without any help whatsoever from Paul.

