

[FIRST SLIDE] 'I don't love you anymore; on the contrary, I detest you. You are vile, mean, beastly... You don't write to me at all; you don't love your husband...'

No, not a glimpse into the Laynesmith household, but into the lives of the passionate-letter writer Napoleon Bonapart and his wife Josephine. This from a letter sent in 1796.

[COUPLE] It was just a few months after Napoleon had married Josephine, a 33-year-old widow with 2 children. Alas, within four months of the marriage Josephine had already taken a young lover in Paris, a handsome lieutenant, 10 years her junior. Rumours quickly reached Napoleon on campaign in Italy, evincing a slew of passionate, angry and jealous letters. When Napoleon's letters failed to work, in revenge Napoleon began to take on a series of public mistresses.

[HORSE] Writing to Josephine eight years later in 1804, the French emperor justified his actions

*"I am not a man like others and moral laws or the laws that govern conventional behaviour do not apply to me. My mistresses do not in the least engage my feelings. Power is my mistress."*

[LETTERS/BOOK] Remarkably, Napoleon's letters to Josephine, along with as many as 50,000 others he wrote, still survive. And they allow historians, and makers of great recent blockbusters, the opportunity to look inside the mind of one of history's great actors. In Napoleon's case, a person whose political ambitions and egocentricity led to over a decade of conflicts that saw the deaths of over 3 million soldiers.

[WRITING] Writing is a remarkable invention. I think we may have forgotten just how remarkable it is. Just think about it: a letter allows an idea, a feeling inside one person's head, to pass through space and time to reach inside another person's head. A spoken word might last just a second; a word shouted might be heard a few metres away. But writing turns something brief and tiny into a physical form that can endure for thousands of years and that can traverse the globe.

[TEXT] While we don't write as many letters as we once did, our ideas and words continue to be embodied in other ways: in texts and tweets, WhatsApps and emails. The magical principle of writing remains essential to us: what is in

our heads is still being made known to others through this technology. Words continue to be embodied; they are still taking on kinds of flesh.

[QUOTE] 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory'. When John wrote those words, I wonder if writing itself still retained that sense of being a miracle: after all, at the time few people could read, and even fewer could write. Those who heard the Gospel read to them would likely still have thought it a wonder that this technology of writing enabled such communication.

And so when John described *Jesus* as God's word, Jesus as the embodied communication of God that enters time and space to reach us, those first readers might have seen the similarity with, for example...

[EMPEROR] the Imperial letter that could miraculously leave the emperor's own hand in Rome, and cross the Mediterranean to a distant province causing an army to march; or, maybe, the similarity with an inscription on the walls of a Temple, which could miraculously remind people generations later of a long-dead donor in the distant past.

The metaphor of the technology of the writing, embodying words so that they can cross time and space is, when you think about it, a powerful one.

[JESUS HEAD] And so, in tonight's Gospel reading, John uses this metaphor and by it wishes to say to us that just as when we look through Napoleon's letters and see behind them a fragile, self-obsessed man, so too when we look through the embodied Word Jesus, we will see the divine source of his life, and so gain a vision of what God is like. John wants to say that Jesus is God's living letter to us.

[JESUS] And what does the author of Jesus look like? Well, the Divine Word that takes flesh in Jesus is, of course not just a single word expressed at only one point of Jesus's life: God's nature is not just revealed in the vulnerable babe in the manger, nor only in the curious and precocious young Jesus whose passion for God causes him to break the rules and go awol when a boy; nor is God's nature only heard in Jesus's profound and provocative preaching that challenges the world's normal priorities; nor it is only in his healings which upset the differences between clean and unclean, worthy and unworthy; nor is God's word heard only in Jesus's death or in what happens mysteriously after. John wishes to step back from any single point of Jesus' life and say to us: read the whole of Jesus' life, and in all of it you will find God speaking; all of Jesus is

God's letter in human form. If you pay attention to this human letter you will hear the mind of God and feel the love of God, and not only this, you will learn what a human life could and should look like, too.

[EARTH] We are on the cusp of a new year: with elections in this country and the US; with further climate discussions in Brazil; with questions about what happens next in Ukraine and in Israel and Gaza. And that is to say nothing of the little significances of our own daily lives. But in all of this, John would say to us, if you want to know how best to navigate these matters, if you want to know the best way to be human together, listen to God's word, God's word made flesh; and just as the mind of the letter writer reaches the mind of the reader; listen closely, and so let God's Word, through Jesus, take form in you.