

‘Back in the day, things were far better than they are now.’ How often we are tempted to don our own secret pair of rose-tinted specs as we utter words such as these. That being said, people are becoming more and more aware in this technological age that a fundamental element of what it means to be human is fast disappearing; common courtesy.

The word itself is derived from the French word, ‘courteis’ which has been variously translated but the one I like best comes from the shorter OED; ‘formed’ Giving and receiving courtesy means that we keep alive a sense of human refinement, as in Scottish Country dancing when participating couples begin and end with a bow or curtsy to each another. Whether small or great, discourtesy jars against this worthy quality and can stir up resentment or even inflict pain. Of course, we still see courtesy in action when people hold doors open for one another, when car drivers stop to let someone out of a side road, or when we get a courtesy call to check how we’re coping with the new dishwasher. But perhaps society has become a little bit suspicious of courtesy, wondering what those giving it are looking for in exchange.

Since the invention of the wheel, humankind has striven to make life easier, whether it’s getting more bang for your buck or trying to attain the mythical and ironic notion of time-saving. Why?

So we can (allegedly) be more productive (or, in real terms, we're simply **'busier' and often more stressed out than we used to be**). In the 15th and 16th centuries, Courtesy literature was all the rage, inspiring generations to focus on human qualities of etiquette, behaviour and morals. A translation of German and Italian literature influenced the works of Shakespeare, Spenser and Ben Johnson. A more contemporary, online Blogger called Vince Sparks has posted a piece entitled 'The Disappearance of Common Courtesy'. It's something of a humorous rant against the unbridled use of mobile phones in public that subjects total strangers to loud exchanges of inane and uncomfortably personal details, the likes of which used to go on in hushed whispers behind closed doors. He does have a point.

Whether we like it or not, through the invention of Wi-Fi, we're literally immersed into the online worlds of Gmail, Twitter, Instagram, Bebo and the like, along with the murkier realms of sexting, trolling and cyber bullying. Nowadays, anyone can post ill-considered, defamatory, hurtful, discourteous comments for the whole world to see without ever having to say them out loud, face-to-face. In that way, I think that things were probably much better a century ago when British soldiers in Belgian Trenches kept in contact with their loved ones by letter and telegram.

St Paul tirelessly reminded his readership that he assumed a kind of physical presence with them whenever his words were read publicly. Our 1982 Liturgy is peppered with words of thanks to God, particularly in the Eucharistic Prayer and in what we say after Communion in the section entitled Thanksgiving and Sending Out. Although the annual Round-Robin typeset letter that drops out of Christmas cards doesn't really 'do it' for me, thank goodness we still hold fast to the tradition of the handwritten Thank You letter or note.

Around 3000 years ago, a well-respected Aramean soldier launched a 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'-sort of rant at Elisha's front door. Having received a flawed communication from the King of Aram (he obviously didn't listen to what Naaman's servant girl actually told him), the King of Israel had packed off this foreign nobleman with his tail between his legs to call on an old man who lived near a dirty river. (I've seen the Jordan river and it is very murky and fly-infested). We don't know Elisha's motive for not greeting Naaman in person – some think he was trying to humble this illustrious man whilst others suggest that the prophet wanted to avoid any direct association with God's miraculous gift that would be given to Naaman. Whatever his reasoning, Naaman interpreted Elisha's absentee behaviour as being rude and discourteous and was all for turning on his heels and riding off in a huff. Thankfully, his own servants gently persuaded him to submit to this simple, humbling act.

By doing so, Naaman encountered the deeply moving nature of God's courtesy and was both restored and re-formed by his experience.

What's the answer to Jesus' indignant question to the Samaritan ex-leper about his 9 Jewish cohorts? Likewise, we don't know. Leviticus 13 confirms that Jesus was obeying the Law by sending them off to be examined by the Levitical priest. After all, they were the ultimate adjudicators about whether a problem with someone's made them unclean or not. Perhaps these outcasts felt shunned by the one person they knew who could make them socially acceptable once more; perhaps the group had split up now that the common denominator of leprosy had vanished and finding him as individuals was just too hard; perhaps they were just an ungrateful bunch. St Luke leaves his readers with no uncertainty that their responses to heavenly gifts and God's eternal love and mercy should come from thankful hearts that are touched with awe and wonder.

Vince Sparks also wrote this in his Blog; 'People are so concerned with their own destination they forget to consider that other people may exist outside their own agenda'. This is a human failing that affects us all from time to time, especially in the Church when her gaze turns away from mission and discipleship and only focuses on decline in financial income and 'membership'.

Instead, Jesus bids us to make time and space to be open and receptive to God's bidding and the Spirit's guidance, however weird and wonderful it may seem at first. In her writings entitled *The Revelations of Divine Love*, Lady Julian of Norwich speaks a lot about God's spiritual courtesy towards her. At one point, she writes, 'our *courteous* Lord sheweth himself to the soul cheerfully with glad countenance, with a friendly welcome.' We can learn a lot by her simple, thankful humility.

In our actions, as well as our words, may we always work together to keep courtesy alive and active in our communities, in our families, in our own lives. We are blessed with a form of worship that invites us to be courteous every time we meet together to receive the Sacrament in bread and wine. As God's magnificent Creation continually expands and develops, may we constantly pray that a re-engagement with courtesy will form it into a place where God's Kingdom can be fully realised.