

# Write your letter to the nation...

*REtoday* is pleased to present an interview with the new Archbishop of York, the Rt Revd **Stephen Cottrell**, which explores the book he wrote as a series of letters to England to explain his Christian vision. He was inspired by a young woman in a coffee queue at Paddington Station who asked him why he became a priest. These two pages offer some extracts from the book to use with pupils. We have found that pupils aged 8–18 have much to say when stimulated by this idea. Turn the page to see some examples.

## Dear England

I'm writing this because I want to explain to you why I'm a Christian. I wasn't brought up as a member of the church. There was a bit of me that always believed in God and had a sense of God.

I'm trying to explain why being a Christian helps me to make sense of life.

I started writing this letter in an England dominated by Brexit. We felt divided among ourselves in a way I have never really known in my lifetime.

On 24th March 2020, the country went into lockdown. With this dark tragedy has come a new unity. Where could this new sense of belonging together as a nation and even as a world lead us, and how could it be shaped? How might we reimagine our common life and serve the common good as we come out of the coronavirus crisis?

Dear England, there is a way through the horrors that have been visited upon us through the pandemic. It is the way of Jesus Christ. Let me try and explain how my heart has been changed.

### Finding hope

Are there experiences and memories that make you feel you belong in the universe? Is there a day that, as you look back over your life, you think: 'that was the day when I felt most myself'? Is there a moment

when life just made sense? Hold on to these experiences of wonder, delight and belonging for a moment. They are the stuff of your humanity.

I am arguing that you have a spiritual dimension to life (even if you don't use the word) because your experiences of love, joy, wonder, fulfilment, sadness and even the darker feelings crave an explanation. It is these things that define and delight us. They are a starting point for believing in God.

We know that love is not a finite resource. You can give it all away completely and still have every bit of it left to give again. You don't need to give just a small slice of love away so that there will be enough to go around. Love replenishes itself by being given away. So God is constantly giving and receiving and overflowing, because God is love.

Whenever we realise that there are some things we would die for (though they are more likely to be people than ideas) we are experiencing the echo of the creator God who made us out of this same substance: love. There is nothing we can do to stop God loving us, and nothing God will do to force us to love in return. God created us to love: to love ourselves properly, to love others and to love God.

Many people still hope for a win on the lottery: we don't so much want to change the world as to become rich enough to escape into another one! But most of us, of course, don't win.

9/11, the Iraq war, the all-too-numerous genocides of this century, Brexit and fear of COVID have hammered away at the human spirit and left us even more inclined to look for individual ways of surviving and finding happiness. All this can be changed. Christians believe that in Jesus God shows us what being human is supposed to look like, and deals with all the things that separate us from God and each other.

### Taking heart

The world needs a set of values and a story that will save us from ourselves and our worst instincts. A person who is himself the revelation of God's love, who even laid down his life to search out those who are lost – the very image of the invisible God, and more than that someone who loves us and knows what it is like to be us.

Things can change. One person can make a difference. In Jesus we are shown another way.

In the last part of this letter I am simply going to dream with you about what our dear country might become if we inhabited it differently. I hope we will still live in a



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close relationship with Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and in a renewed relationship with Europe but what will that look like? I believe our best future will emerge when we learn how we belong to each other and how we can build communities of belonging. It's unapologetically hopeful: how could it be otherwise when I see what God has done for me in Jesus Christ?

### Changing the world

Dear England, one of the ways in which we shall ensure we are part of God's plan is by praying. And although prayer is hard to define, it is easy to start.

‘To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising’ said the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. As we make space for God to work in us, so the whole ordering of the world changes.

What God wants is justice, that can only come when we recognise that we inhabit this planet together. God requires us to share what we have with those in need. We do not own the land: we must treat it fairly preserve its fertility and share its goodness.

Four million children live in poverty. That's a third of all children living in the UK.

Last year, in Kenya, where they had not had any proper rain for 18 months [and]

their animals were already dying, I saw drought and famine. It brought home to me the shattering impact of climate change on the poorest. But it was also a lesson in hope. This community that had so little welcomed me as their guest and shared with me what they had. Astonishing hospitality! There is nothing good about poverty, but equally there is nothing good about wealth if it is not shared. Bolstered by God's great desire for human [flourishing, a different] way is possible.

Dear England, as Archbishop of York I write this letter out of my new responsibility to speak to the nation about the things of God. This is my country, and I love it, but not only have we slipped from our Christian moorings, I fear we have also forgotten how to love ourselves.

Pulling together, teamwork, collaboration, these are the best of what it is to be human. They reflect the very being of God. They can become a new Englishness. The most dangerous future is the one where we just go back to how things were. The great [biblical] vision is that we might work with God for the renewal of the earth that in the [Bible] is sometimes referred to as a new heaven and a new earth. It is about establishing God's peace 'here on earth, as it is in heaven'.

Most of my school reports included a line somewhere saying that I was a bit of a dreamer. I am guilty as charged. My dream is that in living out our lives in communion with [God] we may find the peace we crave.

In every moment in the darkest hour and in the eye of every storm, we have an opportunity to repent, to turn around, to receive the chance to start again and change direction. We also know that we are held in the darkness and carried into the light. It is never too late for love. We can never be so lost that God cannot find us.

I hope that you may be changed by this letter, and I hope our nation and our world may be changed as well.

Dear England, let us go in peace. Let us take heart.

**Extracts from Dear England by Stephen Cottrell (Hodder & Stoughton 2021). Used by kind permission.**





# Interview with Archbishop Stephen, and learners' letters

Photo: Archbishop of York's Office

## When you were writing *Dear England*, did you think about young people engaging with this idea of a letter to the country?

The answer is probably no for children, but yes for young people. The young woman who prompted me to write the book during our chat on Paddington Station in a coffee queue was maybe in her mid-twenties, and the themes and ideas of the book are things which in my experience children and young people are deeply concerned about. Perhaps, inspired by this conversation, I should do a children's version. A good idea!

## What are the main Christian and spiritual themes of your book?

I believe that the world is not as it should be, and in Christ we see a vision of what humanity is meant to be. That can show us how we might inhabit the world. God can change the world. The way this happens is one heart at a time. My heart needs to be changed, and I believe God can change other people's hearts, so we can live in the world as we see it in Christ.

## You speak without using theological language. Is that important?

Very important to me. Maybe there was a time when I hid behind or wallowed in Christian jargon. My heart's desire is to reach out beyond the Church to the world that God loves, so I try to speak in a language that connects and is compelling. In the Christian faith you are introducing people to a person, not a set of propositions. It is much more like wooing people (a word I like). What's your best chat-up line? If I was looking for one, I'd quote Shakespeare's Othello: 'I [do] love thee! And when I love thee not, chaos [is] come again.' Outside of the love we see and have in Jesus, there lies chaos. Jesus' Gospel is about the

human need for love. I sense that this love is freely available.

It is simple in one way. As humans encounter its beauty and challenge, then if you can't explain this to a small child, the chances are that you don't really know it.

## Canon Michael Green dedicated a book to those who don't read religious books. Is *Dear England* addressed to people beyond the churches?

Yes. I've had some lovely letters and emails about the book, and one I liked a lot was from a retired Baptist minister [who] wrote and told me he had bought a dozen copies and sent them to all his non-Christian friends. The book is out there now, and if God wants to use it and bless it, then God will.

## The book is not argumentative – you have called it 'winsome'. Why have you gone that way?

I am an evangelist. It is my heart's desire to share the good news of Jesus with people. How you do this is important; almost as important as whether you do it. You have to share Christ in a Christlike way, challenging but also affirming and compassionate. We have often presented the Gospel as true and good. This is important, but the three platonic virtues are truth, goodness and beauty. In a culture that doesn't inhabit categories of sin and forgiveness very readily, then speaking about the beauty of Christ is a way for people to begin to think about the Gospel.

We all have that experience of falling short of our own ideals, and I don't duck the big questions of ethics and doctrine, but I start somewhere else. I want to encourage the Church to think more creatively about its evangelism.

Dear England,

I know life has become more difficult than ever in the last year. No-one could have predicted what has happened to us. However, we have pulled through: clapped for our brave NHS; donated to Si Tom; had conversations from front gardens; tested; traced; vaccinated; worked out how to use Zoom; and pulled together a country. We don't know what the future may bring, but it is of the utmost importance that we continue to help and support those around us.

You must remember that how the future plays out rests with you. Realise that you are a small part of a much bigger movement striving towards a peer and safer future, and in that you must play your part. You could be donating money, or volunteering, checking up on someone, or getting someone's shopping. It doesn't have to be big, but even the smallest (Covid-19 safe) thing can make a difference.

As a country, we have pulled together massively in this crisis, so keep hope, for things will get better.

Yours Sincerely,

Fpion

Dear England,

We have all become selfish. Our only desires in life are to please ourselves. We do not care about the consequences our greed has on anyone else. Our planet is dying and yet we only care about ourselves. Our need for materialistic objects has become out of hand. We must end this cycle of self-indulgence.

We all must become more loving, more accepting and more compassionate towards others.

Alone we are nothing, but together we can all make changes for the better of this society.

Many thanks,

Sophie and Ben



Dear England, I am writing you this letter because I want to say I am talking to you about what I am grateful for. I am mainly grateful for life. I am grateful for my house and family because I have the best mum and dad and also my house is the best.

Gratefulness is one of the greatest feelings to have because it makes everyone happy. I love gratefulness because I love people's smiles. I hope our country can be grateful because some people doesn't have half the things we have such as homes, technology and most of all family.

Ciaran, 9

**'I am an evangelist. It is my heart's desire to share the good news of Jesus with people. How you do this is important; almost as important as whether you do it.'**

Dear England, I am writing you this letter because I want to say:

- It is ok to feel sad, frustrated or annoyed.
- It is ok to miss family or friends.
- It is ok to help others who are different or the same.
- It is ok to have friends who do not like the same things as you or who are different.
- Thank you to all the key workers in England.

Yours truly, Finley

### How might the main message of *Dear England* – about love being available to all – apply in schools?

All schools value values. I want to say to every school that values don't exist in a vacuum; they come from somewhere. The Christian narrative shaped this nation, but there's a danger that we prize the values but forget where they come from. It is not self-evident to love your neighbour; it comes from the revelation of God in Jesus.

### We have a large number of rather delightful letters to 'Dear England' and 'Dear Wales'. What do you think about these pupils' ideas?

These letters are profoundly moving. They need to be published! I'm really struck by Kieron's focus on gratefulness. Often children pray 'thank you' and adults pray 'please'. The dynamic of gratitude in that letter is profoundly Christian – it reflects the NHS Thursday clap. The Christian understanding is that adoration and praise are good for us, changing the way we relate

to the world around. Expand your heart – it's like exercising a muscle with praise and giving thanks.

Sophie and Ben's is a beautiful letter too. Our world needs more than anything to learn how to live lightly on the Earth, to learn what 'enough' looks like.

I finish the book by inviting people to 'take courage, take heart'. The word 'courage' comes from the French *coeur*, 'heart'. The conversation that started the book changed me a little. A moment of revelation: I need a new heart, an idea that comes from the scriptures, in Ezekiel 36: 'God says "I will give you a new heart."' I found that interesting.

I'd like to thank the children who've written all these letters. My huge gratitude to the children and young people for their encouragement, from which I take heart.

Dear England I am writing this because I want to say murdering is not right and im not saying you kill but I know some of you do this is also not legal and what would the people you care about think of you if you would like to stop you can.

I'm also grateful for when everyone cares for each other I don't see that often though I love to see it whenever I see stare for a bit seeing the positive side of the world that I wish the world would be.

I'm also writing this because I wanna say this world is dark and positive I say go to the positive side smile get treat others the way you and they want to be treated can't say more so bye.

Yours sincerely  
Muhammad  
age 9, year 5



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