

## **Bishop Martin Seeley writes...**

I realised I came from a line of hoarders when we cleared out my father's house after he went into a care home. I found my father's school exercise books - and my grandfather's, from the early 1900s. The loft was not only stuffed full with boxes and boxes of my father's papers, magazines, books and all sorts of items, not only filled with his stuff, but he'd kept his father's stuff too.

There was also a poignant moment when we were clearing out the loft and I was going through a box of electronics magazines – my father was a physics teacher – and half-way down in the box found a nondescript brown envelope. In the envelope, in this box I thought was just full of magazines, were letters my mother had written to my father, in 1951, before they were married, when he was at sea, serving in the Navy. Love letters. He had forgotten he had them.

That experience made me promise to myself that I would not leave my children the same challenge my father had left my sister and me.

And so now, as I prepare to move out of the Bishop's House in Ipswich ahead of my retirement after 10 years in Suffolk next month (February), I am trying to make good on that promise and clear out before I move out. And of course that means discovering things I had forgotten I had, and in particular, letters that I had forgotten I'd kept.

So in my clearing out the other day I found a box – a large files storage box – filled with folders and boxes stuffed with letters. I seem to have kept every letter I have ever received. They ranged from the very practical – one from a bank manager in the early 1970s when I was a student, letting me know he would let me take £10 a week out of my account. To rather too many not very romantic, "I don't want to hurt you, but this isn't working" letters from old girlfriends.

So the question I was faced with was, do I keep them, or do I throw them away?

The old girlfriend letters went. But surely, I argued with myself, a letter from a bank manager letting me take out £10 would be an interesting bit of social history for my children. I've kept them at the moment, but I think they will need to go too. I'm not sure my children need that sort of memento.

But then there are the letters from my parents, my sister, and friends, including ones from friends I still have, that trace the years from early adulthood, over 50 years ago. Those feel precious, and I've kept them, at least for now. I can imagine sitting down with my sister, or one or other of my lifelong friends and remembering with them the events, the dramas, the emotions, that the letters convey. They feel like part of my life, and they connect me not just with the family or friends who wrote them, but with the me of decades ago. These is something quite special about a long hand-written letter, made up of descriptions of events and places, news of other people, reflections on life in general and in particular for the author of the letter, responses to something I must have said in a previous letter, little rebukes, or expressions of affection, or both. And there is something about the feel of the letter – the dry crumple paper, or the very thin blue aerogrammes, of which there are a lot, because I lived abroad for 12 years.

I am going to keep the letters, at least for now, that remind me of the people and the events that have shaped who I am, that remind me of the people whose lives are intertwined with mine.

I have found reading some of these letters salutary, reminding me of key influences that I had forgotten, decisions that had set my life on a new stage which had receded in my memory. They have reminded me just how much our past shapes us, and I am struck just how much seemingly small events and encounters have held the presence of God, guiding, nudging, rescuing, challenging me through my life. It is probably only looking back that we see this, see God's guiding hand, rather than in the moment of something happening.

And that is true of us as individuals and as communities, and indeed nations, as we remember the events that have shaped how and who we are today.

So I'm not going to clear out all these letters, at least not just yet. Not until I have been able to trace and be thankful for the multitude of ways people, and through them, God, have shaped who I am today.