

Sermon 4<sup>th</sup> September 2022

Philemon 1-21 and Luke 14:25-33

Due to a double booking my friend the Rev Russell Davies couldn't be here today to bring you his sermon, however Russell kindly sent me his sermon notes and I will use bits and pieces of his work as we think about the Letter to Philemon. Can such a small piece of the scriptures offer us any insights into our own life of faith? Why is this deeply personal letter from Paul to his friend Philemon even in the Bible, why is it in the lectionary? Someone along the way had obviously thought it to be important. And in today's modern world how relevant is the theme of slave master and slave; the closest we come to that is in the throwaway line to friends and family "what did your last slave die of" when we humorously want to point out they are being demanding. In the next few minutes I will circle around all these questions but first here is some background to Paul's letter to Philemon.

There are three characters involved; Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. Paul is under house arrest in Ephesus, awaiting his trial before the Emperor. He is being cared for, among others, by Onesimus, whose name means Useful, and Paul has become very attached to Onesimus who has been looking after Paul with great love and affection since Onesimus became a Christian.

The problem is that Onesimus is a runaway slave, a crime under Roman Imperial law that is punishable by death. Who is the master from whom he appears to have embezzled, or mismanaged funds or simply stolen from? It is none other than Philemon, friend and convert to the faith through the Paul and the leader of the small Christian church in Laodicea. So, Paul has a problem; he can't continue to house this runaway slave. Nor can he take the obvious 21st Century answer; denounce slavery as an abomination to God and society. "There is *neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28. Why can't he do that?

The whole Roman Empire was based on slavery; Historians tell us that one fourth to a third of the population were slaves. So there was no guarantee that Philemon would be ready to forgive Onesimus or set him free, which will be something of a scandal to all his friends and neighbours, and to the society in general. So how is Paul going to handle it?

Listen to part of it... *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."*

Russell explains this section of the letter saying that Paul, "doesn't really give Philemon much room for manoeuvre. The emotional pressure screams out at you from the page." Russell goes on to point out that although this is a personal letter over a personal matter it is addressed to Philemon's church and therefore it would have been read out to the whole congregation. There is a lot at stake here as they will all know what is going on and they will be watching Philemon's every move.

I guess with modern eyes we could call Paul's approach manipulative, but I have never read it that way; I don't really know why. Russell points out that given the culture of the day, it was a brilliant approach that created a legal appeal in which Philemon's brothers and sisters in Christ become judge, jury, and court. They will have the opportunity to apply Paul's own teachings of the new creation and new society in Jesus Christ in a real-life situation. Brilliant.

So the next time one of our slaves runs away, no wait slavery no longer exists or does it? This is actually a little promotion for a special guest speaker Libby Sorrell who on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September will give us a talk on modern day slavery. Make sure you are here for that important service. You will find it very enlightening.

Now back to the letter to Philemon. What does this letter have to offer us today? Firstly is it important to note that this biblical text has been misread in the past to actually condone slavery. When we approach the bible how do we prevent such dreadful misreading's and what can we learn from Paul when we face potential conflicts.

The clue is in Paul's approach to the Philemon vs. Onesimus dilemma.

Throughout the letter Paul addresses the whole church as brothers and sisters, everyone, slaves, slaveowners, jews, gentiles, all are equal in Christ. These people are Paul's partners in Christ, and together they share in the good things that faith in Christ offers. Although Paul had the right to order Philemon to welcome back Onesimus as a brother he does not play that card, well not directly, no Paul appeals to him on the basis of love, a love that has been revealed, understood, and imparted to the believers in and through Jesus Christ.

When we read the scriptures then the love we know in Christ must always be our foundation. Writer Brian McClaren demonstrates this by using a bible, like so.. We have the OT and NT, how do we read them correctly, by interpreting them though the spine, the middle, the centre which is Jesus. If we do it any other way we miss so much of the meaning and the message.

Next time you face a difficult bible passage or a moral or ethical dilemma or a tricky issue with friends, family or even perhaps here in church, (yes we can have conflicts to), find your foundation first in the love of Jesus Christ and work back from there. A fancy name for this is theological reflection, which asks us to connect all our thinking, all our decisions and all our interactions with others to the gospel.

So how did it all work out in the end for Philemon and Onesimus. Russell did some research, and it turns out that the next time we hear of Onesimus, he is mentioned alongside Epaphras as a respected leader in Colossae. Then, 50 years later, Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, was being taken to Rome for execution. On the way he writes to the church at Ephesus — a letter which fortunately survived — and it pays great tribute to their bishop, Onesimus!

William Barclay writes that "Through this letter the great bishop (Onesimus) tells the world that once he was a runaway slave and thief, and that he owed his life to Paul and to Jesus Christ. Through it, the great bishop insists on telling of his own shame, so that his very shame might (give honour) redound to the glory of God."

Did Philemon 'let go and let God', did he centre his decision on the foundation of Christ, did

he renounce his rights, swallow his pride, put aside his own perspective and bias, it seems so.  
May it be so for us.

**Amen.**