

SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 08.09.2019

Deuteronomy 30: 15-end; Philemon 1-21; St Luke 14: 25-33

Right in the middle of the big heavy-weight letters from St Paul in the New Testament is this tiny sliver, the letter of Philemon. Very rarely read, its inclusion in the Bible might seem rather pointless. But let's look at the details and see what it might say to us now.

Sometime in the middle of the 1st century Onesimus, a slave, runs away from his master, Philemon. Not just runs away, but takes with him some valuables too. Somehow he finds his way from Colossae to a larger city (unknown) but there his luck runs out and he is arrested and thrown into prison.

Escaping slaves in the Roman empire always ran the risk of being executed but in this case Onesimus meets St Paul, also a prisoner in jail, and is converted to Christianity. It seems that in their time together, Paul grew pretty fond of Onesimus and the slave proved to be a very useful pair of hands. The question was what to do with Onesimus once he had been freed.

Paul is torn: he would have quite liked to hang on to Onesimus for his help in building up the infant Church but instead they agree that Onesimus should return to his master, armed only with the letter that we have in the Bible. But it is a very small world. As we discover in the letter Philemon the slave owner had also been converted to Christianity – and by Paul himself.

So we read of the way Paul spells out the choice for Philemon. As the owner of many slaves he can either do the usual thing of punishing what amounted to his own property – or, because Philemon was himself a believer – Paul could appeal to his better nature and remind him that Onesimus was not just a slave but was now a fellow child of God and servant of Christ.

As we can see Paul doesn't hold back: he appeals to Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a brother, to accept reimbursement for the goods that he had lost – and then to treat his slave as if he were Paul himself! Onesimus' conversion, and Philemon's own conversion some time before, had changed everything: the old rules no longer applied. They were now all under the rule of the real Master, Christ himself.

And then Paul goes for broke: perhaps, he says, Philemon would like to free Onesimus – and send him back to Paul because the old man was struggling with the task of spreading the Gospel and could well do with a fit young man to help with the growing demands of the Early Church? Possibly Philemon had helped Paul in the past but had then left. How about Onesimus taking his place?

As we know St Paul seems not to suffer from any inhibitions when it came to serving his Lord! In the longer letter which we know as the Epistle to the Colossians he mentions Epaphras and a string of others whom he has already recruited for the work of building up the Church, a Church where all God's children were to be treated equally.

Sadly we don't know the end to the story but Tradition (in the form of the historian St Ignatius) has it that Onesimus became bishop of Ephesus.

But apart from giving us a quick insight into the Christian community two thousand years ago, what does this short letter to Philemon leave us with? Well, a pretty radical and challenging attitude to the question about what is mine what I can do with it - once I am a member of the Church and a disciple of Christ. As we said last week, what we have is really on loan and our duty is to make sure that what we have serves the community and not just ourselves.

But it also segues into the themes of today's familiar Gospel which is ostensibly all about planning: *who would build a house without first working out the cost? If they build the foundations and then can't finish the work, won't everyone laugh at them?*

Except I don't think this is all this means. Life is rarely that straightforward. We might plan to do something and think we have all the pieces of the puzzle neatly in place. But I can't think of a single project I have ever been involved in (and that is lots!) that haven't had to be revised again and again because of things that crop up unexpectedly. It isn't that I haven't planned adequately; it is what Prime Minister Harold Macmillan called '*events, dear boy, events!*' Circumstances change and we simply have to adapt.

Philemon may have bought his slave in good faith. How was he to know that the boy would end up in a prison far away from home, and then be converted by the same St Paul who had converted him in rather different circumstances? *Events, dear boy, events.*

When Jesus tells us in the final Gospel punchline: *so none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions* we could read this as an invitation to become a wandering monk - or it could be translated: *if you want to be my disciple, be ready for the totally unexpected – and don't use what you have as possessions as an excuse for avoiding doing the things I am asking of you - or going where I am leading.* The image that Paul gives to Philemon looks like this: *Perhaps the reason why Onesimus was taken from you was so that he might be returned to you as more than a slave. Now he is a beloved brother.*

And isn't that true of this Christian journey? What we hold on to most tightly can so easily be taken away – and probably will be! But when God is involved, we get it back in a much better and richer form. Fred Kaan wrote a lovely hymn that has kept me going for years. It is basically talking about the bread of Holy Communion but of course that is just the gateway to so much more:

***Put peace into another's hands
and like a treasure hold it,
protect it like a candle flame,
with tenderness enfold it.***

***Put peace into each other's hands
with loving expectation;
be gentle in your words and ways,
in touch with God's creation.***

***Put peace into each other's hands,
like bread we break for sharing;
look people warmly in the eye:
our life is meant for caring.***

***As at communion, shape your hands
into a waiting cradle;
the gift of Christ receive, revere,
united round the table.***

***Put Christ into each other's hands,
he is love's deepest measure;
in love make peace, give peace a chance
and share it like a treasure.***