

A Slave My Brother?

Sunday 4 September, 2016

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, The Revd Dr Ruth Redpath.

Readings: Deuteronomy 30 : 15 – 20; Philemon 1 - 25

In this day of texting and tweeting and skypeing, letter-writing is a dying art. Younger people in the church tonight may not believe that at school a long time ago, we were taught the correct way to write a reply to a party invitation (which of course would always be posted), how to address the envelope, and then how to word the thankyou letter afterwards.

In the 1970's living in London, my mother wrote me a closely written aerogram or several sheets of light-weight airmail paper every weekend. Four days later, I would read the account of all the family doings, the happy and the sad, the important and the trivial. I treasured those letters and of course replied, though, admittedly, not always at such length.

Well just think what letter-writing was like in biblical times. Our New Testament contains many letters written - with great care - on parchment, reaching their destination only so quickly as someone on foot or on horseback or in a chariot could deliver them.

Tonight for our second reading, we read the whole of one of the shortest of the New Testament letters – all 25 verses of it. Paul's letter to Philemon is a text that has always delighted me, probably because it has a more personal flavour than others. It is as if we have been given the privilege of looking not just over Paul's shoulder but into his heart as he wrote. And it is all about relationships, primarily relationships between 3 people - Paul himself, the recipient Philemon, and a certain person known to them both called Onesimus.

Paul is in prison, probably in Rome. Philemon to whom he writes is clearly a good friend. He calls him, "our dear friend", and "my brother". It is quite possible that "Apphia our sister" is his wife and "Archippus our fellow-soldier" is his son.

We glean from here and elsewhere that Philemon is a Gentile Christian living in Colossae in Asia Minor (Turkey). We can assume he is well-to-do, and, as would be expected, slaves form part of his household. His is a hospitable home – the local Christian community meets there, and he even has a spare room in his house in which Paul would love to stay when released from prison. A particularly strong personal bond between them is hinted at. It seems likely that Philemon came to faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of Paul in Ephesus.

Paul has also got a strong relationship with Onesimus, whom we learn had been Philemon's slave. Onesimus is now with Paul, who is grateful for the support that he has received from him while in prison. There is a play on words here because the name Onesimus meant "beneficial" or "useful". But there is a stronger bond firing Paul's interest in Onesimus too. Paul also calls him "my child" - suggesting that he too has come to faith in Jesus through Paul's ministry while in prison.

But how did he come to be with Paul - many miles from the household of Philemon in Colossae? We don't know for sure - but the letter suggests that he has run away from his master, that he has wronged him in some way.

We react when we read about slavery, especially when the system is given implicit support in the scriptures. But just let us set aside our disapproval of the system for the moment.

In Paul's time, slaves were an integral part of well-to-do households, some carrying significant responsibility. Having said that, they were regarded as the master's property, and for a slave to run away was a capital offence.

Paul knows that the runaway slave has to be returned to his master.

So there we have it. Three players. A wealthy slave-owner, a runaway slave, and a mediator who happens to be an Apostle of Jesus.

How is everything going to be put right?

They can't pick up the mobile, they can't have a skype conversation, or send an e-mail. There is nothing else for it, but a letter to Philemon - hard copy - to be carried - by hand - by one Tychicus along with Onesimus himself .

So what tone does Paul adopt?

Well - he observes the conventions and courtesies of letter-writing of the time.

When he states his particular reason for writing, he asks Philemon to do something quite unexpected – to accept Onesimus back. He could have come on strongly, exercising the undoubted authority he had in the early church as one of the apostles.

But it is not like that.

It is not even on the basis of their warm personal friendship that he gently but persuasively pleads the slave's case.

He and Philemon share faith in Jesus Christ and Paul has a particular way of describing that. It is not just a casual relationship via facebook. He tells Philemon that he is praying that "the sharing of your faith" will be "effective in the good being done for Christ." The word "sharing" in our version translates the word "koinonia" - a word closely equivalent to the English word "partnership". (Indeed in Greek it was used in business and legal contexts.) A partnership speaks of commitment one to the other, of equality, of shared objectives, in this case a common desire to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing here about one of the partners dominating the other. "Consider me your partner" says Paul to Philemon (vs 17). "I want you to come to a common mind with me about how Onesimus should be treated on the basis of our shared faith, our partnership in the gospel."

Even as Paul couldn't shield Onesimus from what had to happen in sending him back, neither was he shielding Philemon.

Just think of it. He was asking Philemon to forgive his slave for running away.

One could imagine the ridicule that could be heaped on Philemon's head by his neighbours for such weakness and naivety.

"Such actions could encourage rebellion among slaves and undermine the whole social system," we could imagine them saying.

No - says Paul - "our partnership as Christians has to override those considerations. If this partnership is going to be effective in doing good for the gospel, new things have to happen, there will be new ways of living for individuals, for households, and for communities."

But there was more. Philemon was not just asked to accept Onesimus back because of his partnership with Paul. Philemon was being asked to consider Onesimus also as a fellow partner - as no less than a brother.

Are you listening Philemon?

Barriers which separate people may include gender - that Philemon's wife is mentioned by name suggests that an openness in relationships between men and women was not a problem for Philemon.

What about race and religion? - many of the churches of Asia Minor included both Jewish and Gentile converts, and that was certainly true of the church in Philemon's house in Colossae.

But slave and free? Sorry Philemon - but he is your brother. We are - all 3 of us - equal partners in the gospel.

So Philemon, welcome Onesimus back just as you would welcome me.

Forgive him, Philemon, just as Jesus Christ has forgiven you. (And, by the way, if there is any debt to repay, I am willing to settle that.)

So what happens days and days later when Philemon unrolls the scroll and reads Paul's words? Perhaps Tychicus hands it over - leaving Onesimus outside or in the slaves' quarters nervously waiting to see what his master's reaction will be.

We don't know - but somehow I think that Philemon's response was what Paul desired and prayed for. The parchment **didn't** get thrown into the furnace in anger - we still have it in hard copy.

And how blessed we are in that - as we have here a living example of Christian reconciliation and how it can work.

As I was thinking this week about the distinctiveness of this letter in our scriptures, I said to myself, "There is no explicit theological teaching, nor ethical instruction, nor concern about beliefs or practices needing correction in the church, such as we find to varying degrees in Paul's other letters".

Thinking further, of course, it IS based on some profound New Testament theology, which has ethical implications.

All human reconciliation with God is based on his saving action in Jesus Christ.

God, said Paul, was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. By Christ's Cross, all barriers that divide us one from another are broken down. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism - not a hierarchy among us, but an equal partnership, a family of brothers and sisters.

This letter precisely exemplifies what Paul said to the Galatian Christians, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. All of you are one in Christ Jesus."

So what are the implications of this 1st century letter for us as 21st century Christians? - highlighting as it does the issue of slavery - which to us is anathema. We may well ask why it took Christians another 1800 years to dismantle substantially such an inhumane system. The early church had no political power to change such a pervasive societal structure. But how subversive, how disruptive it must have been for the likes of Philemon who had become Christians to demonstrate such a revolutionary attitude to that hierarchy of humanity. Indeed, in his letter to the whole church in Colossae, probably also carried by Tychicus and Onesimus on the same journey, Paul says this - "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a master in heaven."

The very foundations of the system began to be shaken into irrelevance because of the grace of God in Christ.

These days, when we hear so much about border protection, and the erection of walls between countries, how refreshing it is, even as it is challenging, to have another foundational motive and a model for resolution of difficulties put before us, prompting us to action in our time about the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, for example.

We may not have slaves to command, but there are still parts of the world where virtual slavery operates as in sweat shops and in the growing of cash crops. There are ways – including letter-writing - in which we can help to eradicate such exploitation.

In our places of employment, we may be in positions of power where inferiors are treated patronisingly. Whatever our rank, we are called to treat all with respect and grace.

Sadly, in the church we often encounter painful breakdowns in relationships. This letter gives us all, not just clergy, a model of pastoral leadership based not on compulsion or overbearing authority, but on principles of love and forgiveness as between brothers and sisters who are common recipients of the grace of God.

There are no limits to the effectiveness of the witness that we can offer to the world around us - in the breaking down of walls which so readily divide one from another when we act in such divinely inspired partnership.

May God help us to exhibit such a pattern in our lives day by day.