

Sermon for 7th September 2025, Year C, Pentecost 13

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Sermon

Back in the days when I first felt I might be being called by God to ordained ministry as a priest, I had to attend a three-day selection conference called a BAP or Bishop's Advisory Panel. This involved being interviewed by three assessors, giving a presentation to the other candidates on some church-related topic, and writing a pastoral letter based on a hypothetical situation that a vicar might encounter. For example, you might be asked "How would you write to a single mother who is concerned that her teenage daughter might be doing drugs?" or "What would you say to a parishioner who is having an affair and has written to you to ask your advice as to whether they should leave their spouse for their lover?" These hypothetical situations are left very open with vague circumstances that make many possible responses reasonable. The purpose of the exercise is not to seek out those who respond in a correct and prescribed manner, but to see how sensitive we are to the potential complexities of real-life situations, rather than jumping to simplistic, naïve, or moralistic solutions.

Paul's letter to Philemon reads like a perfect example of one of these pastoral letters. Philemon, it appears, had a slave called Onesimus, and that slave had apparently run away, perhaps after stealing some of Philemon's property, and ended up in Rome or Ephesus, where he came to be converted by Paul, and subsequently supported Paul during his captivity.

This leaves a significant ethical dilemma for Paul and for Onesimus. Paul knows Onesimus as a helpful brother in Christ, but he also knows that Onesimus is a runaway slave and possibly a thief, and that his owner is another Christian, Philemon, a man who is wealthy and important enough to own slaves, and also an elder of a church that met in his own house.

Clearly, both Paul and Onesimus want Onesimus to remain with Paul, but Paul cannot simply expropriate another man's property, even if that man, as it turns out, is also a Christian.

Paul therefore writes a beautifully subtle yet ethically charged letter to Philemon, in which his intention is clearly to convince him that he should now treat Onesimus not as a slave and certainly not as a runaway thieving slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. To facilitate this, Paul offers to make restitution for any wrong that Onesimus has done and repay any theft.

Modern people are often disappointed that Paul never outright condemns or criticises slavery in his culture. It seems to be just part of the Roman world he takes for granted. Instead, Paul's response echoes Jesus when he is challenged over whether he will pay taxes to the Romans. Jesus points out that the currency has Caesar's head on it, so give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but give to God what belongs to God. It's a cunning way of obeying the law while making it clear that there is a much higher obligation at stake that we may tend to forget. Similarly, Paul politely reminds Philemon that Onesimus is now a brother in Christ, and that this comes with privileges, joys and duties that transcend issues of property, wealth, and status. The Roman world may assume that one man can own another, but Christian brotherhood implies a deeper equality.

To the modern ear, and perhaps even to the ancient, Paul sounds like he's sending Philemon on a bit of a guilt trip. 'To have Onesimus as an equal brother is far better than having him as a slave,' Paul declares. 'Previously Onesimus was useless to you, but now he is a fellow Christian doing good and useful things for both of us, and for God!' (In fact, in Greek, Onesimus actually means 'useful,' and those of us who have names which can be easily used as a puns will know how hilarious Onesimus must have found that particular joke by Paul).

Paul continues with his guilt-trip: 'You may have lost Onesimus for a while, but now you have him back as a brother forever! Except can you please send him back to me. And by the way, don't forget how much you owe me. I wouldn't

dream of commanding you, but I know you will do far more out of love than I could ever ask. And you know I would never do anything without your consent.'

What is not recorded in the bible is Philemon's response. I wonder how you might have responded in Philemon's place. Imagine, you have a deep friendship with Paul and are in his debt – perhaps Paul was the one who converted you, and you are now a respected elder in the Church Paul founded. Yet Paul is asking you not only to forgive a slave who stole from you but also to trust that he too is now a follower of Christ and to treat him as a brother, to release him from slavery, and to treat him as if he were Paul himself. You might be dubious about your thieving slave's conversion!

Paul's letter is quite beautifully argued. If Philemon is indeed a true Christian, he must surely welcome such a letter and Paul's proposed outcome, with complete joy! What could be better than the redemption of a wicked slave to become a willing servant of Christ, a brother in the kingdom of God, and the opportunity to demonstrate forgiveness and generosity of spirit in welcoming Onesimus unconditionally as an equal.

But if, instead, the letter pricks any irritation or anger in Philemon, or he feels manipulated, this can surely only come from an unchristian spirit. In other words, everything Christian in Philemon will receive such a letter with simple joy and delight, while anything unchristian – 'of the world' so to speak – will be resentful and full of complaint.

It's not clear how intentionally Paul is doing this. Is he deliberately testing Philemon, or is he simply writing from his loving heart in innocent expectation that Philemon could not possibly read it any other way? For this reason, I think it's a really compelling letter for modern Christians to reflect on, perhaps over coffee after the service.

How would we write this letter, if Onesimus had shown up at our door? Slavery is no longer legal here, but we might face a similar dilemma with migrants arriving from abroad. If they come asking for Baptism, do we immediately trust their

honesty, or do we suspect they're just trying to get evidence to support their asylum claim? What if we discovered they had entered our country on small boats, and were at risk of being sent home to a place where their life would be in danger? What letter might we write to the authorities on their behalf? Would we in fact want to write anything at all? What is right, and what is wrong, in such complicated situations?

Paul's letter challenges us to think about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the surrounding culture we live in. Does becoming a Christian change our relationships with one another, and with our society?

And how does our faith transform us to make us more willing to give up status and wealth to support God's Kingdom? Are we perhaps secretly relieved that I decided not to preach on the gospel this morning in which Jesus states that "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions"? (I assume that includes, but is not limited to, slaves!)

Have our hearts been truly changed by our faith, by our constant awareness of God's love? Or do we still long for revenge when we are wronged, and hold on to resentments and want others to get what's coming to them?

We don't really know the end of Onesimus' story, but he does get mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians – which is where Philemon lived. Colossians chapter 4 verse 9 says that Paul sent Onesimus as a messenger to Colossae and described him as "a faithful and beloved brother, one of you". A later letter written by one of the Church Fathers to the Ephesians describes Onesimus as "a man of inexpressible love, and your bishop," and Orthodox tradition records him as being martyred in Rome on account of his faith. So perhaps we can believe that Philemon greeted him fondly and forgave him as Paul had hoped.

And what an impact that forgiveness must have had, that a thieving slave might become a bishop and a martyr.

"I love and forgive you," says God. "You are my beloved child."

"But I don't deserve it," you reply. "Exactly. This is what love means."