

Sermon – Philemon (10 May 2020)

Justice - Equality NT style!

• Introduction

- How well do you know this book of the Bible?
- Perhaps you have never read it or heard it read before
- If you do know it and were asked to summarise what it is all about you might say, 'a runaway slave and his master' and you would be right – but it is indeed more than that
- So what is it?
 - A very short letter – only 2 John and 3 John are shorter
 - It is a private communication between the Apostle Paul and Philemon – a leader of a house church – and possibly his congregation
- So what is it not?
 - A theological treatise
 - A discourse on the morality or otherwise of slave ownership
- Although clearly the letter speaks into the relationship between Philemon and his slave, Onesimus, it also tells us something of Philemon's and Onesimus individual relationship with Paul too
- We turn to these three relationship in a little more detail

- **Relationship 1 – Paul and Philemon**

- Firstly Paul and Philemon
- This is a letter written from the Apostle Paul to a church leader – leading a house church in Colossae
- This letter is the only surviving example of Paul writing to an individual rather than to a group or a church
- Paul is writing in pastoral mode to a fellow pastor, seeking to give guidance as to the pastoral conundrum that he has. What to do with Onesimus?
- Paul is clear in his guidance but also thoughtful and insightful as to how he gives the guidance
- He could (as he points out in vv8-9) instruct Philemon in his course of action, '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.', says Paul
- Although Paul is quite able to give clear, unequivocal, and direct instruction elsewhere in other letters, here he chooses to provide guidance but not instruction. He appeals to Philemon as a church leader to do what Christian love would indicate.
- WWJD – What would Jesus do? – would be appropriate.

- Paul is putting the situation in such a way that Philemon will ask that question and come to an appropriate Jesus-centric conclusion
- Paul empowers Philemon to look again at the problem of Onesimus – he appeals to Philemon rather than instructs
- **Application** And for us the object lesson might be, we are so often better to guide people’s thinking and then get them to ask the WWJD question, than to seek to instruct someone to do a particular action for a desired outcome
- **Point 2 – Paul and Onesimus**
 - The second relationship is between Paul and Onesimus
 - Onesimus – the name means ‘beneficial’ or ‘useful’ hence the play on words in v11
 - He describes Onesimus as a ‘son’
 - How Paul met up with Onesimus is not stated, however due to the meeting Onesimus became a Christian
 - The sense in v10 and 11 is of this runaway slave coming to faith in Jesus, probably through the direct ministry of Paul, and even though we assume that he is a recent convert, Paul describes as being useful to him – the play on words is quite intentional. We could read in to this supported by Colossians 4:7-9, ‘Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear

brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

- Onesimus is on Paul's ministry team! A faithful and dear brother – what a different description to 'a runaway slave'
- Although this is not directly stated, some commentators observe that perhaps the letter to Philemon (a private one) and the letter to the Colossians (a public one to read in the various churches in Colossae) were taken at the same time by the same team – the letter to Philemon explaining what had happened to his runaway slave and why he was now part of Paul's ministry team
- **Application** We need to be open to the calling of all of us to ministry and service. Onesimus was probably a most unlikely ministry team member, and perhaps one that Philemon would find very difficult to accept. We need to value the contributions of all of our church members – young and old, new Christians or followers of Jesus for decades –

those with good conduct records and those that bring baggage with them too

- **Point 3 – Philemon and Onesimus**

- And so we finally come to the central characters in this letter – Philemon and Onesimus
- We do not know how Philemon responded
- The dilemmas he has:
 - Welcoming back a runaway slave would be seen as an act of weakness by Philemon's (Secular) peer group – they would expect Onesimus to be severely punished, possibly by crucifixion
 - Does he free Onesimus? – NB this might not be in Onesimus' best interest because in the ANE slaves could indeed be well treated, looked after, fed and clothed, and indeed have responsibility within the household, running affairs or teaching the children
- So what guidance might he have from Paul?
 - Here Paul envisages the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus not being one of master/salve but of being one of affection – indeed as brothers in Christ
 - To Philemon the letter is an olive branch to create and encourage reconciliation –

- for Onesimus it is potentially a charter for liberty
- For Philemon the challenge is for him to welcome Onesimus back as he would indeed welcome Paul – ‘for Onesimus, think of me instead, how would you treat me’, says Paul
 - Paul not only models reconciliation - he also facilitates it by offering to pay for Onesimus’ dues (if there are any) – v18 – the debts are to be charged to Paul’s account underpinned in his own handwriting to ensure that Philemon see this as authentic
 - Paul does not point the finger of condemn – either Philemon for having a slave in the first place, or Onesimus for running away – he affirms his loving commitment to both – in order to create reconciliation between the two
 - **Application** - The call to follow Jesus is a call to be in community – to be relational
 - The poignancy of this should not be lost on us as we continue in lockdown, missing physical contact with family and friends
 - Even in these times where we are in virtual community (as against physically gathered in a church building) are there relationship which we are called to work on? – reconciliation required if a relationship is under strain or indeed may have broken down

- **Conclusion**

- Paul often in his writing teaches deep theological truths – however, here he is giving a living illustration of what Christian living looks like
- He acts as a diplomat and not as a dictator - he appeals to Philemon to act out of love rather than compulsion
- Alistair Campbell – Q. Why should Philemon do this? – A. v6 uses the word Greek word, 'koinonia' which means 'mutual participation' – this is the sharing of life as brothers and sisters united in Jesus – the unity of the body of Christ – so Paul tells Philemon to 'welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me' – v17
- We are called to the body of Christ – in unity with one another – taking each other at face value –
- Let's commit ourselves, even in these strange and difficult times to be even more bonded to each other – in prayer and mutual support