

12th Sunday after Trinity, September 7th, 2025

10.30 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Deuteronomy 30.15-e, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14.25-33

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Somewhere around the year 59 AD, we find the Christian leader Aristarchus on a boat that had sailed from Caesarea, on the coast of northern Israel, and was now approaching the port of Attalea in Asia Minor - southern Turkey as it is today. He is accompanied by a young man named Onesimus who is looking nervously and apprehensively at the harbour as it draws closer. In Caesarea they had left the apostle Paul under house arrest, and his companions that included the gospel writers Mark and Luke. Aristarchus was carrying a number of letters from Paul for delivery in southern Asia Minor. One of these was for the church at Colossae, around 150 miles inland from Attalea, and another was a more general letter for circulation amongst the other churches in that area. We know it now as the letter to the Ephesians. And there was a third, personal letter, to a Christian in Colossae named Philemon. It was the third of these that was causing the young Onesimus to be more than a little apprehensive. Philemon seems to have been a wealthy Christian that had opened his home as a venue for the growing Colossian church. He was married to Apphia and his son Archippus was one of the leaders of that church. As far as we can judge from the content of the letter, Onesimus was a slave of Philemon who had run away, at some point in the past, possibly with some stolen money. Sometime after his departure he had come across the apostle Paul, probably while the latter was under house arrest in Caesarea, and had become a Christian. He and Paul had become close, and seems to have been a comfort to Paul in his confinement. The name Onesimus means "useful", which is a typical slave name and probably indicates he was actually born to slave parents, and in a pun, Paul talks of him as being "useful" in his imprisonment. But the situation was not really sustainable, and Paul decided that he had to return to his master. In his letter to Philemon, Paul urges that Onesimus be accepted as a Christian brother. He writes

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Paul himself promised to pay any debt that was owed. Paul doesn't actually say that Onesimus should be freed from slavery, but that is certainly implied in the text. To add a bit of force to his argument Paul the writes

I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

He then adds, in the next verse that is strangely omitted from our reading

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

This I think can be read two ways – either as Paul expressing confidence that he would soon be released from house arrest and able to travel himself, or an implied warning that Philemon would need to justify himself if he didn't acquiesce to Paul's wishes. Nothing like a bit of pressure.

We don't know what the outcome of Paul's plea to Philemon was (or if he ever used the guest room), but the fact that the letter was preserved suggests that all ended well. Early church records suggest that Onesimus became a bishop, although there is a bit of confusion here as to when and where – a major turn round indeed for the runaway slave.

This short letter was preserved by the church, the only such personal letter to survive amongst the hundreds that Paul must have written during his lifetime, and came to be regarded as part of scripture, as having something important to say to Christians through the ages. So what is it saying to us here today?

Firstly, and quite simply, the letter shows us that the church should be a place of reconciliation and forgiveness, where all are equal. Paul calls on Philemon to forgive and be reconciled with Onesimus as Jesus on the basis that Jesus had died so that they might both be reconciled to God. And forgiveness and being reconciled with one another is what the church should be about, hard as it can be at times.

In the Roman Empire at that time there was extreme social differentiation – slaves, either slave born or by conquest and capture; and free – either free born or freed from slavery. The slave class probably amounted to 30% of the entire population, and there was little social movement between the groups. But here Paul urges Philemon to treat Onesimus as his brother in Christ, a huge breach of social norms. About 10 years before that Paul had written some well known words to the Galatian church.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus

Here Paul urges that that principle be put into practice. The result seems to have ultimately led to Onesimus becoming a Bishop, a leader in the local church, a major upending of social convention. And this of course is a lesson that the church continually needs to relearn, particularly in hierarchical churches such as the Church of England, that regardless of social class, race, education, ordained or lay, we are all one in Christ Jesus. And it is of course a message that we all need to take on board in our dealings with each other, that regardless of our role, our profession, our age and so on, we are all equal in God's sight. It's a message we need to hear again and again, because it is our natural inclination to favour one person over another, to think ourselves more important than someone else, even to believe that clergy are somehow superior to laity. Believe me, that is a very serious error.

Secondly the reading says something about the cost of discipleship, of following Jesus. Slaves were valuable possessions and being asked to give one up was asking a very great deal – they were worth a lot of money. A concept of the costliness of discipleship ties in

with the gospel reading I think where Jesus tells those listening to him that if they want to follow him they would have to give up both family and possessions and to carry the cross. The context here of course is that he is addressing those who would follow him on his itinerant ministry, where there was no real alternative but to say goodbye to family and to sell their possessions to support themselves on the journey ahead, and is thus applicable to a specific situation. But in general terms it tells us that following Jesus is costly, and indeed may cost us everything. One of the Church of England commemorations in the past week that has particularly struck me has been for the 20th century martyrs of Papua New Guinea – at the hands of a hostile indigenous population in the early years of the century, and those of the Japanese invaders in the middle of the century. As TS Elliot says in one of his poems "*There will always be martyrs and saints*", for whom following Jesus costs them their lives. But for us too, just getting on with our Christian life, supporting the church, carrying the burdens of those we love can also be costly and sometimes difficult, both in terms of our resources, our possessions, our time, and we all need to support each other in our walk with God.

But I think there are more things to learn from the story of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus if we perhaps take a wider view. Perhaps the thing that most strikes us is the situation into which it is written, where slavery was an accepted an integral part of the society, as indeed it had been throughout the ancient world as far back as records take us, and it was to remain widespread until recent times. And over the years the letter to Philemon has been used to justify slavery on the one hand, as Paul didn't argue for its abolition, and to justify its abolition on the other, as there is certainly the strong implication that Paul wanted Onesimus to be freed. This hardly seems fair, as Paul was writing into a specific personal situation, But in the other letters that Aristarchus was carrying, he spells out his attitude to slavery in more detail, giving instructions to both Christian slaves and masters. Both the letters say much the same thing, so I'll just read one set from Colossians

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

and on the other hand

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Paul again doesn't call for the abolition of the institution, but at least in the Christian context radically reinterprets it, with both slaves and their masters being answerable to God in heaven. Slaves should work for their masters as if working for God; and Masters should treat their slaves justly and fairly. And in so reinterpreting it, he actually subverts the institution of slavery. Over the centuries this led to a growing abolitionist movement across Europe, with the Church Fathers taking its lead from Paul's writings, and in particular that within the church there was "*neither slave nor free*". In England slavery was common through the Anglo-Saxon era, with slaves being replenished from the warfare between tribes and later between English and Danes. At the Domesday survey about ten percent of the population of the country were enslaved, including around 20 in Rutland,

particularly in Empingham for some reason. The early Norman kings and their Bishops, over the first few decades after the conquest, acting again on their reading of Paul's letters, made slavery illegal in England at least *de jure* if not *de facto*. For the next century or so, the Welsh and the Scots still had a taste for English slaves, but by the early medieval ages the practice had pretty much died out in Britain. But making it illegal internationally had to wait till the 19th century of course, with the abolitionist movement of Wilberforce, again driven by the evangelical Clapham sect informed by Paul's writing. This eventually came about at great financial cost to the country. The whole process of abolishing slavery was messy, with lots of contradictions, and took almost 2000 years to bring about, but Paul's writings in Ephesians and Colossians were instrumental in the process. As these letters were clearly written at the same time as that to Philemon, I think it likely that Paul's teaching on the nature of slavery was informed by the very practical situation of what to do with the runaway slave Onesimus who had become a Christian.

But there is more – the instructions Paul gives on the master / slave relationship have served as a model for Christians about how they should act in any kind of business relationship – employer and employee, dealer and customer. To carry out or work and other duties as if we were serving Christ, and to act justly and not to threaten or bully those with whom we work with and interact with. This is something we all need to be reminded of – even those in call centres at the other end of the phone line are human and deserve to be treated fairly and justly. In Paul's words we find the outline of an ethical system for employment situations and personal transactions – that indeed has become embedded in our legal framework.

So in this perhaps very minor, and very personal affair, of Philemon, Paul and Onesimus, we find the seed that led to the eventual abolition of slavery 1900 years later, and to the establishment of an ethical code for employment practices. And all this says something about how God works – the smallest of deeds of kindness and justice can lead to long term consequences about which we can hardly dream – something else that we need to hold onto as we try to follow Jesus as best we can, in a confusing and chaotic world.

But there is yet more. Around the time that Paul was considering what to do about Onesimus, he also wrote a letter to the church at Philippi in Macedonia, on the other side of the Bosphorus to Colossae. In that letter he takes the concept of slavery and turns it on its head.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

He uses slavery as a metaphor for the central act of the Christian faith – Christ's passion and death, and in doing so sets out the basis of both Christian relationship, as servants or slaves of each other, and as a pattern for Christian ministry. Another of the church's commemorations in the past week has been that of Pope Gregory, who initiated the mission of Augustine that re-established the English church. He described himself as the servant, of the servants of God, or the slave of the slaves of God – his concept of ministry

being based directly on Paul's words. It is not unreasonable to think that all this flowed from Paul's considerations as to what to do about Onesimus.

Thus in Philemon we have a short, very personal letter, relating to a specific incident and individual, but one that still speaks – about how we should regard our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, putting aside all thoughts of status; about the costliness of being a disciple of the Lord, in terms of how we use our possessions and our time; and, taking a wider view, how in God's economy, small acts of concern and kindness can have huge long term effects that we can't possibly imagine and also gives us a model of Christian ministry and relationships. Quite a lot there from a 400 word letter. Onesimus was useful indeed, not just to Paul, but to all Christians down the ages.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen