

Philemon: becoming children of God and family of one another

Sunday 8 September, 2019

A sermon preached by the Dean, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

I love the letter to Philemon. It's the shortest, and one of the most pointed letters of our patron, St Paul, and his offside, Timothy. Written from prison at the end of his life, it condenses Paul's theology into only 25 verses. Paul writes to his friend Philemon and to the community of believers that meet in his home. This letter is more than a request to Philemon to deal graciously with his runaway slave Onesimus. It is addressed to all who live and worship in Philemon's home. As such it is not only a private letter to a 'dear friend and co-worker', but also a pastoral epistle to the church community gathered around Philemon.

The church community gathered at Philemon's home would not only receive encouragement from Paul's writing to them, but would also, no doubt, have advised Philemon on how to act in his affairs. The description of a Christian house-church in the Acts of the Apostles suggests that 'all who believed were together and had all things in common ... day by day ... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God'. If this was true for the people of Philemon's household, then they were a worshipping community that shared in community, and as such would have had a view on how the community should act in the matter of the returned slave Onesimus.

This short epistle, then, is about more than the relationship between a master of a house and his slave. It advocates that the church at Philemon's home should be generous to the runaway slave, because God has been generous to them. It tells them (and us with them) about the incredible generosity of God's love and, how out of that love, we should let our own relationships be transformed. It tells us that we because *we* were adopted as children of God, we have become family to one another. It tells us that when we share our faith with others, the barriers our society puts in place – even the barriers of ownership and slavery – can be broken down and removed.

We need to do a bit of Biblical detective work and turn to Paul's letter to the Colossians, to find out more about the community of faith that met at Philemon's home. In that letter Onesimus (the slave who fled from Philemon) and Archippus (whom Paul mentions twice, at the beginning of the short epistle, and in his final greetings) are described both as members of the Colossian church. Neither Philemon nor Apphia 'our sister' are mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures. But because they

are named in the address of the letter together with Archippus, it is highly likely that they are a nuclear family, which would make Philemon and Apphia a couple, and the parents of Archippus. The three host a house church in Colossae whose 'love for the saints' – that is their fellow believers in Christ – 'and whose faith towards the Lord Jesus' is well known, Paul writes.

Philemon himself had been converted by Paul: he owes his life in Christ to Paul, Paul reminds him. And out of that indebtedness, Paul appeals to him on behalf of the slave Onesimus, a fellow convert of Paul's. Onesimus had clearly absented himself from Colossae: he had made his way to the capital city of the empire, where he had become of great help to Paul. The apostle tells Philemon that he had adopted Onesimus; to Paul the runaway slave had become like a son; he calls him 'my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment'. Paul loves Onesimus like his own heart, he writes. While to his previous owner Philemon the slave had been of little use, to Paul he had been invaluable. And now he sends the slave home to Colossae, and bids his former owner and the community there to be gracious to the returning Onesimus: 'perhaps he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever', Paul writes, and emphasises: 'no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave: a beloved brother'.

Philemon, who owes his life in Christ to Paul, whose Father in God Paul had been, is asked to receive Paul's adopted son, who also happens to be his lost, or runaway property. 'I say nothing about your owning me even your own self', Paul writes pointedly to Philemon. *Both* Onesimus and he owe their lives in Christ to Paul affirms. They have one Father in God, Paul. As such they are family in the flesh. Just as they have one heavenly Father, and are therefore family in the Lord Jesus Christ. Philemon ought to be duty bound to receive Onesimus as a brother, 'both in the flesh and in the Lord'. That does not mean that Onesimus' debt should not be repaid. Justice should be done. But a greater justice will from now on direct the relationship between slave and owner: God's justice, whose will is grace and peace in the Lord Jesus, as Paul writes at the outset of his short letter.

Our reading does not tell us whether Onesimus was set free, which is frustrating. However, in the letter to the Colossians, Onesimus is mentioned as accompanying Tychicus back to Colossae. This is not necessarily an indicator that he has been given his freedom - slaves often would travel for their masters – but it does mean that he had been given more freedoms. At the end of Colossians, Paul adds a poignant reminder regarding the welfare of slaves: 'Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven'. This is addressed to all of those who own the lives of others, but could also be a reminder to Onesimus' master. For Paul's gospel is that our *Master in heaven* is willing to be our *Father in heaven*, if we let ourselves be transformed by the love of Christ. In the same way in which Paul, in today's epistle has pledged to pay any debts for the runaway slave, and so ensured his acceptance by Philemon as a 'beloved brother, in the flesh and in the Lord', so

Christ has paid our own debts, making us acceptable to God the heavenly Master. We are no longer slaves but beloved children, Paul writes to the slave owner Philemon. In the same way, Onesimus is a beloved child and brother. Which is why, at the end of our epistle, Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon and the church at his home will 'do even more than he says', and accept the slave as a fellow believer and brother.

'We are all God's Onesimuses', the German reformer Martin Luther once put it. God wants us not to be slaves, but his adopted children. Through Christ he has tied himself to us by the same profound love that leads Paul to speak of his own adopted son, Onesimus, as 'my own heart'. And just as Paul does not wish to force the freedom of his adopted son, but sought the consent of Philemon, so God also does not force us to accept the freedom he offers us in Christ. Rather, he reaches out to us in love, and invites us to act out of that love, turning to him, and letting our lives and relationships be transformed through the love that is the foundation of Christian living. That love, that faith, Paul knows, will break down the barriers that continue to separate us, will overcome the structures of injustice. That love, that faith, when shared through *community*, will bring joy, encouragement and refreshment, Paul tells. Just as it is through love, as Paul tells Philemon, that our sharing of the faith will become fully effective: because we will be motivated to enter into the service of the One who is Love, 'and perceive all the good that we may do for Christ', who first loved us.

If you already have experienced what it means to have become a child of God through Jesus Christ, then this epistle is encouragement to you to show forth the goodness and love that was bestowed on you at your becoming a Christian to others: become people like Paul who work to set others free from modern-day slaveries – literal or metaphorical. People who contribute from their own means to ensure that the cycle of debt is broken – literal or metaphorical – and God's justice may prevail. And if you are yet to know God's love, then this epistle is encouragement for you to think about what it would be like to call on God as Father, to know yourself fully accepted for who you are and who you will be, by God through Christ Jesus. And whether you call yourself a child of God already or whether you are still pondering God's invitation, the epistle is encouragement to all people to reach out to one another in love and forbearance, so that lives and situations that enslave can be transformed.

And so to God the Father, who loved us, and made us accepted in the Beloved: To God the Son, who loved us, and loosed us from our sins by his own blood: To God the Holy Ghost, who sheds abroad the love of God in our hearts: To the one true God be all love and all glory for time and for eternity. *Amen.*