

5 September 2010

Sunday 23C

Sermon notes:

Philemon 1-21

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In our reading from Philemon this morning we strike what we might call a “gentler” Paul than the one with whom we’re more familiar. Unlike, for example, the stridency and urgency of Galatians or the Corinthians letters, or the theological intensity of Romans, here we have a piece which is unique, in that it is a letter to an individual and not to a church or number of churches. There are two things I want to draw from the reading this morning, the first being what Paul proposes as a resolution of the problem the letter addresses, and the second being the importance of what he proposes, for him personally and more generally.

The situation the letter addresses is that a slave, Onesimus, has run away from his master, Philemon. Onesimus has met up with Paul who is currently in prison. This is probably more than coincidence; Onesimus may well have gone to Paul because he knew of the friendship between Paul and Philemon, and so of the possible influence Paul might have had in overcoming whatever problem it was which stood between Onesimus and Philemon. Paul writes to effect a reconciliation between slave and master, and intends to send Onesimus back to Philemon.

Now *because* Paul writes for a reconciliation, and sends Onesimus back, the letter often causes offence to our modern sensibilities: why doesn’t Paul know that slavery is wrong, and write to Philemon that, as a Christian, he should simply not have slaves, and should set Onesimus free? We assume here, of course, that Onesimus actually *wants* to be free, which is itself not a safe assumption. “Freedom” as we know it – the freedom to “Go West, young man”, or woman, or whichever direction might entail the most benefit, was rarely an economic or social possibility in Paul’s times. For Onesimus to be “free” might well have meant for him to be penniless and on the street. Paul does considerably challenge Philemon on his attitude towards Onesimus, but he doesn’t run the whole “anti-slavery” line.

This might well seem weak to us today, and certainly one of the moral criticisms of Christian belief is that strong and effect Christian voices against slavery were not heard until the 18th century. But we might consider our own situation now. If, in two or three generations, some of even the more moderate predictions regarding

climate change are proved to have been right on the ball, how will we respond as a society to our great grandchildren for our moral failure in our responses today? We might take the current sceptics’ approach and declare that we didn’t really have enough information to be certain of the threat, and so opted for a smaller car or a solar hot water heater, “just in case”. Or we might be more honest and respond that it was just too hard to change, too expensive to upgrade appliances, to go with renewable energy sources, too hard to give up the car and the “freedom” which a car brings. Here, of course, this freedom – which is precisely what we want Onesimus to have – is now what threatens to become a trap. Our “standard of living” – which we take as a sign of our freedom – will not suffer voluntary reduction, and such reductions can scarcely be enforced in a Western democracy. We would argue – perhaps rightly – that it just couldn’t all be done as quickly as it might seem was necessary.

It was not much different for Paul: an injunction upon Philemon was not going to be the first domino in the abolition of slavery. Paul does implicitly question the slavery relationship, but he places the moral pressure not on the structure of first century Roman society which delivered such slavery but on how believers might live within the confines of that structure. Given the sheer *necessity* – at least for Onesimus’ sake – of the social structure of masters and slaves, Paul works on how Christian faith might make a difference. In particular, he addresses Philemon on the difference it might make that both he and Onesimus were both Christians: Onesimus, he reminds Philemon, is not merely a slave but a brother in Christ. And this changes enormously the character of the relationship between them, if not the actual social structure which relates them. What we believe ourselves to be before God makes a difference for how we are to be in our relationships before others, whether we are able to change our circumstances, or not. But how we are in our relationships to each other *does* go a long way towards changing our circumstances. The first thing to note about Paul’s response to this situation, then, is that he takes the basic issue to be one about the relationships between persons, and not what we might call the “big” questions about the powers and dominions within which we live.

The other thing I want to comment on this morning is the nature of Paul’s own involvement in the matter, for he is not simply a mediator. He takes a stake in the matter himself. He declares that he has previously been encouraged by having heard that Philemon has been a source of refreshment for other believers. He now asks that Philemon become a source of refreshment for Paul himself: “Yes, brother, let *me* have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh *my* heart in

Christ" (v20). Paul makes Philemon's accepting back of Onesimus a matter of his accepting of Paul himself: "If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." So, while the problem began with a breakdown in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, Paul now looks to see the effect of God's reconciliation of us to himself in Christ take on a concrete modelling in a reconciliation between this master and his slave. Paul is not impartial, but thoroughly interested in what happens here, for it either will be, or will not be, an affirmation of the kind of ethic which flows from the gospel of God's reconciliation with us. What happens, then, will be a demonstration, or a denial, of that gospel. Paul's letter is more than just a bit of heavy moral leaning on Philemon. For Paul what happens between two believers is a matter for the whole church, for there the gospel is tested and proven, or not.

Amen.

I remarked at the start that this is a letter somewhat different in tone and target than most of Paul's other letters. And it is remarkable that we actually have it today. Most of the other letters could be understood to have been received by congregations and forwarded on to other communities, and so we have them by virtue of the decision of one faith community to send them to a sister church to share the teaching and the blessing. The letter to Philemon, however, was a personal one. For it to have entered the public realm Philemon would have had to make it known to the church which met in his house, and from there to others. This suggests that, perhaps, Paul was successful in his attempts at effecting a reconciliation – that Philemon agreed with Paul and received Onesimus back on good terms, and that something new began in their relationship and household.

To read this letter today, then, is to see the proof of the gospel's reconciliatory power. The story of Jesus makes a difference – in the relationship between these three men nearly two thousand years ago – and this we see and feel even today in our very reading of the letter.

Having heard of this victory of so long ago, it only remains for us to continue to test and to prove the gospel today in our own relationships in and the relationships of those who name Christ with us.

By the grace of God, may our eyes be opened to see where there is a need for such reconciliation in our relationships with those around us, and may we have the courage to work for those necessary changes on the small scale of our relationships which demonstrate the truth of the great changes which God works to effect for the blessing of all.