

The letter to Philemon is an odd letter to have in the canon of Scripture. If you come from the view that every single word and grammatical note in the Bible was dictated by God you might, rightly, wonder why God had so much time to dictate this! At only 335 words long it is by far the shortest Pauline letter, and his most human. It's not densely doctrinal like Romans, it's not argumentative and grumpy like Corinthians, it doesn't use the great hymns or themes of Paul's theology like Galatians and Philippians do, it isn't a grand summary of Paul's theology like Colossians and Ephesians, and although it's personal like the pastoral epistles it isn't concerned with church structure.

No, the letter is concerned with one man Onesimus and the relationship Paul is sending him back to with Philemon. Short and apparently lightweight it might appear to be, but this small letter is explosive. We must do some detective work with the contents to work out what is going on and a lot of the other issues like date and where it was written from are conjecture. A working hypothesis would go something like this:

Paul is in prison around 56 CE probably in Ephesus. Somehow this person, Onesimus, comes across him in prison and is converted by him, my favourite theory is that Onesimus sought Paul out. Because, you see, Onesimus is a runaway slave, owned by Philemon, and knows that this Paul is something big

in this new Way, this following the person Jesus Christ, which his master is doing. And whilst Paul welcomes Onesimus, converts him and builds a relationship with him there are consequences to his actions and Paul knows that he must face them. So, he sends him back with this letter to his owner, Philemon.

Philemon and his wife Apphia and possibly his son Archippus, host a local church in their house, it's pretty certain that they are the leaders of this church. Paul's letter addressed to Philemon is also, not so subtly, addressed to the whole church there; anytime a letter from Paul would have arrived it would have been read to the entire assembly, Paul knows this. The letter is designed to persuade, is astute, with almost every verse hinting at something more than is stated.¹ Paul is almost playful, he doesn't demand anything in this letter. He uses a pun, Onesimus means 'useful' it was a common name for a slave, so Paul riffs on it, arguing that 'Onesimus'/useful has not lived up to his name being useless to Philemon, even losing him money, either through theft or bad decision making we don't know. But he has lived up to his name with Paul, he has been useful. "It makes no attempt to blame Philemon for

¹ Raymond Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p.505

whatever caused Onesimus to run away. It does not demand that Philemon should free Onesimus”², something which Christians have struggled with down the ages, or send him back to Paul. In fact, Paul is at great pains not to demand anything from Philemon.

But, it does publicly ask, in Paul’s name, for forgiveness for Onesimus, and so it involves the members of the house church in this story, they are witnesses of what Philemon does next. And what it does not demand it does imply very strongly. Philemon is not only to forgive Onesimus, he is to receive him as he would receive Paul himself, and he is to be received as more than a slave as a brother. Paul’s enigmatic “knowing that you will do even more than I say,” might be hinting at freeing Onesimus, we don’t know. What we do know is that Paul “challenges a Christian slave owner to defy the conventions: to forgive and receive back into the household a runaway slave; to refuse financial reparation when it is offered, mindful of what one owes to Christ as proclaimed by Paul; to go farther in generosity by freeing the slave; and most important of all from a theological point of view to recognise in Onesimus a beloved brother and thus acknowledge his Christian transformation.”³

² Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year C*,

³ Brown, *op cit*, p.506

Wow. Now you'll hear people grumble about how Paul should have been much clearer about how bad slavery is and no-one should be enslaved, and Christians certainly shouldn't own slaves. True, but Paul did also write that in Christ there is no longer slave nor free. For Paul, as for Jesus, this world was passing away, the present structures and powers were meaningless in the face of the coming kingdom of God. And Paul is much more radical than that, he challenges us to a novel way of relating to people, that could potentially cost us our respectability, our popularity even our money. And in only 335 words.

Now, I think I know what most of you are thinking. I'm spending all my time focusing on Philemon because I don't want to go anywhere near the gospel reading today! Distract with them a Bible study and we'll be ok! Well ... not really, because the letter to Philemon is the way into today's Gospel.

Have you ever had one those of days, or weeks or even longer when you feel like the fighter up against the proverbial ropes, when seven shades of s*%t are being knocked out of you and the referee is distracted, or just refusing to blow the whistle? It feels a bit like that this Sunday after last Sunday's gospel. Last week we were told not to invite the people we like or love to dinner, this

week we're told to hate them! And no matter what linguistic gymnastics you use, no matter how much cover you want to take with hyperbole there is no getting around the fact that Luke's Jesus means what he says. That's why the letter to Philemon is important, it shows us what the outliving of this thing called discipleship is all about, it shows us what orthopraxy looks like.

According to Luke's gospel and Paul's letter relationships, family even is reconfigured by this new faith. "Discipleship moves us beyond comfortable kinship ties to forge new relationships among those commonly committed to Christ, who become to us new family."⁴

The mention of "carrying the cross" brings us back to our baptism, "the fine print written in water."⁵ We are baptised into Christ's death, "so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life," says Paul in Romans. We begin that new journey, it is no coincidence that the gospel starts today with "now large crowds were travelling with him." This is about the journey of discipleship, with each new step learning how to live it out.

⁴ Rodney S Sadler, *Feasting on the Word Year C vol.4*, p.47

⁵ Ronald P Byars, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 4*, p.47

“In the process of becoming living disciples, we must, as Jesus states, also learn to give up all of our possessions – our need to acquire, our yearning for success, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices, our hatreds, and more – and follow the way of Jesus, as we place ourselves on an ever-treading potter’s wheel to examine our thoughts, words, and actions. These things keep us further and further away from the Christlike walk to which Jesus invites us in discipleship.”⁶

At the heart of discipleship is transformation, and Jesus is warning us that whatever comes between us and our discipleship stops our transformation into his likeness. Even when it affects the most fundamental aspects of our lives and our relationships. That’s the whole point of counting the cost, echoed from Deuteronomy, discipleship costs, because it changes us.

Ask Philemon and ask Onesimus. We don’t know what happened, but as the letter is preserved we can be pretty sure Philemon did what Paul asked. There is a tradition that in 144 CE Ignatius of Antioch writes to the Ephesian church, “in the person of Onesimus, a man of love beyond recounting.” And wouldn’t

⁶ Emilie M Townes, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 4*, p.46

a Bishop want to be gathering the letters of the great Apostle Paul, especially one he had carried and that had changed his life so dramatically? The timings just about work out, or it could be that this Bishop took Onesimus' name in honour of him. We just don't know, and we don't really need to.

What we do need to know is what we do next. What the next step is in our journey of faith. Are we comfortable to confront all the things that tell us we are useless? Because we are all Onesimus, all useful, not in a utilitarian way but precisely in the way that Onesimus is useful – in following Christ and in being transformed. But so many things tell us we are useless: we haven't got the time, we don't know what we're doing, we're too old, we're not even that good a Christian. We're an imposter, if people really knew who we were. And for some of us it might be about bigger things, addictions, besetting sins, and yes even relationships that stop us being who we can be in Christ. A, slightly longer than 10 minute sermon, isn't going to fix that, but it can help us to stop and take stock. And if you need a chat about anything that comes up this morning, I'm always available for that, or maybe your spiritual director, or a friend who you can trust to be honest with you, or even prayer this morning during communion, healing isn't just about physical healing but our entire self.

Year C
Twelfth Sunday After Trinity
Deuteronomy 30:15-end
Philemon 1:1-21
Luke 14:25-33

There are times when the Gospel is hard, times when coming to church is dangerous because we're not expected to leave the same way we came in.

This morning is one of those mornings. You can I are called individually, as if Paul had written to us personally, and together, as if we are all witnesses to each other's letters, to discern what the next step is in our own journey of discipleship. What letter will we write with our lives?