

**Runaway slave***Jeremiah 18:1-4; Philemon 1-21*

Every now and again the Bible throws up a passage that reaches out over two millennia to touch our lives. Some will include stirring words, or direct challenges, or gentle comfort, or even the Voice of God. Some will sing songs of sadness or songs of joy. Others will give advice on ethical standards, or acceptable behaviour patterns, or turn our world upside down.

The part of the New Testament that goes under the name of Paul's Letter to Philemon has a special and unusual claim. It carries all the marks of a personal note, addressed to a friend and his circle whom Paul speaks of in terms of endearment and affection. Its theme is the release of a slave from punishment and a recommendation that he not only should be treated with forgiveness but should be given a welcome into the Christian family as a cherished family member.<sup>i</sup>

This is a good story. It is a personal story involving a web of friends and relatively new disciples of the Lord Jesus. Good stories make you think of other stories, and your own life.

Like all recorded letters, we only have one side of the story: Paul's. We know that Paul had visited the Asia Minor city of Colossae, in modern southern Turkey, but he was now under house arrest, probably in Rome. A young slave, Onesimus, had run away from his owner, Philemon, or had overstayed with Paul and was costing his owner Philemon money. Both Onesimus and Philemon were known to Paul and had found Christian faith through Paul's ministry. Onesimus had come to Paul in prison and Paul had found him helpful. We are left wondering if Onesimus had done something wrong which had led to his absconding. A small footnote: the name 'Onesimus' means 'useful' in Greek.

Philemon was a wealthy man who owned a slave and had a house large enough to accommodate one of the first Christian churches. Philemon and his wife Apphia were among the leaders of the congregation.

Whatever Onesimus may have done to the aggrieved Philemon Paul appeals to him to take the slave back, not on the basis of duty but of love. If you are a Christian, how do you show it? Did Onesimus with his new-found faith repent, say he was sorry, acknowledge his fault and make amends; did he even go back? Did Philemon have his new-found conscience shaped by his Christian faith challenged, swallow hard, and put aside his anger and take the young man back?

Peace between Philemon and Onesimus required that they both put their faith into practice. One to acknowledge and recognise guilt and ask for mercy and forgiveness. The other to renounce his privilege and legitimate entitlement as an owner, and suffer the loss both socially and economically. Faith without offering forgiveness on repentance doesn't actually amount to much. From this tiny little letter big, unsettling moral and ethical principles emerge. Can Philemon receive Onesimus back without inflicting legally entitled punishment? Can genuinely frightened Onesimus the runaway, whose conversion may be nothing more than a tactic of convenience, be trusted?

We never find out how the story ends. But we are made to wonder what would **we** have done in this little fragment of history Paul's letter lifts out of obscurity? When we have been in the wrong, are we faithful enough, brave enough, to say sorry and ask for mercy, and face the music? When we have been wronged are we faithful enough, brave enough, to forgive and to let go so that everyone might turn over a new leaf and start again? Do we bear grudges, still? Or do we set free not only the guilty party, but ourselves?

Do we recognise from the Old Testament Jeremiah story that we are clay on God's potter's wheel, constantly being made and remade because sometimes we are not quite right and need to be

reshaped so that who we are on the outside and the inside conforms more nearly to what God shapes us to be. When we break, are we content to submit to be remade? Or do we cling on to our bitter brokenness, all too aware of what it will take for us to be remodelled?

Are we reminded of another runaway in the New Testament, the prodigal son, and the genuinely put-out older brother, and the patient father caught between, waiting for both sons to reshape their lives in mercy and grace? As the forgiving father is caught between his two boys in Jesus' parable, do you see in this real-life story Paul caught between two people he deeply cares about: the Christian slave-owner Philemon, and the Christian slave Onesimus? He wants them both to see the other as a brother in Christ, as equals.

Paul is clear without really forcing either of these men to get them to reflect on the profound connection to Jesus Christ and that Christian behaviour must be reflected in Christian lifestyle and practice. Is faith just lip-service and for show, or does it really make a difference in what you may sometimes sacrifice, in how you live, and how you not only *treat* others but *see* others? How about it, Philemon? And what about you too, Onesimus?

The hook, of course, is that it's not just the two of them who need to think about what this means and how they put it into practice, or not. It applies to all who read this deceptively gentle but profoundly radical personal little letter of only 335 Greek words. Not only how do you read this little letter, but how does this little letter read you? How do we address and resolve the personal conflicts in our own lives? In the family? In the work- place? In the Church? How do we live in grace with each other?

It may be that as you read this letter you are also left wondering why Paul didn't take his argument a step further. Why not assert the profound immorality - the impossibility - of one human being owning another? Why not demand the release of Onesimus, the release of all slaves

everywhere?...In the light of the pervasiveness of slavery in the Roman Empire, such demands may have been unthinkable for a single, obscure individual (himself in prison). Nevertheless the implications of vs 15-16...should not be overlooked. One who is a brother in the Lord can scarcely be a slave in the flesh.<sup>ii</sup> Is Paul calling here for the stronger to release the weaker, and to treat everyone as being part of the one family of faith? We are not to use the language of sisterhood and brotherhood lightly in our churches. "The terms represent real and deep family ties; and as with every family, those ties always have a profound and sometimes profoundly difficult consequences."<sup>iii</sup>

Paul may not have gotten around to it addressing it, but in our C21st modern day slavery is still a very real thing. It takes a community to traffick a person into modern day slavery, and a community to recover them. There are an estimated 132,000 trafficked people in Scotland. Human trafficking has been identified in all 32 local authorities. There will be instances all around this church building in nail bars and pop up car washes. It is in the berry picking farms and other agricultural industries. It is in the homes of people where domestic servants have their daily freedom limited and who are forced to sleep under kitchen tables. What would a C21st Paul write about modern day slavery in our country, and what would he expect us to do about it, or to get us to pressurise those with the necessary official clout to do something about it?

What about all the other things to which people are enslaved today? Long hours for low pay? The enslavement of fuel and food poverty? The contemporary addictions that enslave people to drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling? Enslavement within abusive relationships. All of which cry out for someone to be speaking out about and working for freedom in all of these areas, and more.

Why was this letter, these 335 words preserved? I dare to suggest a happy ending. Perhaps Philemon treasured it. Perhaps Onesimus kept a copy. Perhaps both men saw in it a time when

they were enabled to think bigger and act bigger than they had thought possible, and their faith helped them do that. Perhaps this became an acted parable of the gospel itself, which broke the world of sin, suspicion, and anger, of pride and fear, with the good news that Jesus Christ had revealed, in a real situation, God's purposes of salvation. Here was one way to live in grace with each other. Paul's gift to us today, in a little letter.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> *Ralph P Martin, Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon, p133*

<sup>ii</sup> *Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome in Texts For Preaching Year C, pps 503-504*

<sup>iii</sup> *E Elizabeth Jonhson, Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 4, p42*