

Philemon - A Gospel Story (vs 7-20)

In these difficult times that the coronavirus pandemic has caused, there have been many stories of people showing random acts of kindness to others. This has often meant that people have gone that extra mile to make sure neighbours and friends have all they need, being prepared to run errands for them. In some cases, it has also meant that people have been prepared to cover other people's debts, sometimes even of people they do not know. I have read several posts on social media where complete strangers have come to the aid of people who have found themselves at a supermarket checkout without sufficient funds to pay for their shopping or where other financial help has been given - maybe paying bills for people who have lost their jobs and are struggling to make ends meet. We could even go so far as saying that some of our frontline workers more so than ever have put their own lives at risk in order to save others. They have been prepared to pay the cost of helping and serving others.

But we know, don't we, that there was nothing random about God's acts of kindness - he had a plan from the beginning - a plan of salvation based on love and grace, transformation, and reconciliation.

In our passage this morning, we find the apostle Paul writing to Philemon. It is likely that the short letter was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, and it is thought that Paul and Philemon had met in Colossae when Paul had previously visited there. Philemon was a wealthy man who had started a church in his own home so this letter although written in a personal nature to Philemon would probably have been read to other members of his church.

The background of the letter is that Philemon had a servant, Onesimus, who ran away from Philemon's home, most probably after stealing something - maybe money - from his master. Onesimus then met up with Paul and under his ministry was converted and saved. Paul then writes his letter to Philemon asking that he take Onesimus back but not as a servant, rather as a brother in Christ.

This short letter - especially short for Paul - packs a real punch as it shows us the very heart of the Gospel message and also should encourage us to take heed and follow the advice that Paul gives to Philemon.

In verse 8 Paul says "accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you" meaning that as an Apostle he could demand that Philemon take back his servant, but as he is writing to a fellow Christian he would rather appeal to Philemon's Christian love and mercy and trust that he will make the right decision.

Paul then goes on to use a clever play on words. The name Onesimus actually means useful, so Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus was in fact useless when he was a servant, but now, after his conversion to faith and being a son and brother to Paul in Christ, he could now be reconciled to Philemon as a useful brother in Christ also. Paul says that he would actually have liked to keep Onesimus with him

in order to further proclaim the Kingdom of God during Paul's imprisonment, but he felt it right that he return to Philemon.

In verse 15 Paul writes "for this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever". Those words give us a real reminder, don't they, of the reality of God often using difficult times or circumstances to bring good, always in his time and according to his will. We are again reminded of the absolute need to lean on God and trust in him rather than trying to battle through things on our own. Things may be difficult and hard to cope with but by leaning on God through Jesus in those times we find life more bearable and if our faith is solid, there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Had Onesimus stayed where he was as Philemon's disobedient and untrustworthy servant, he would have been completely useless to his master and his punishment may well have been very harsh indeed. However, in running away, he encountered Paul and had the opportunity to re-evaluate himself and his beliefs and was then given the opportunity to be reconciled with his former boss through the grace and fellowship that is in Jesus Christ, no longer as his servant, but as his brother and equal.

Now for the bit that I find most exciting in this letter where in verses 17-19 Paul writes to his fellow Christian leader, Philemon, "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it". We see here that Paul is offering to settle the debt of Onesimus in order to reconcile him with his master. He also says again that Onesimus should be received back into Philemon's household not as a slave but as an equal, a brother. No longer should the hierarchy of master and servant exist - all are equal if in Christ. He does this because as a Christian he knows that this is the model example that has been set by God himself. Didn't God himself send Jesus to pay our debts that we may be reconciled to God and made righteous in his sight? In Romans 1 verse 5 Paul writes "through whom (that is Jesus Christ) we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" and in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 20 & 21 he writes "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God". This powerful message is as relevant to us today as it was to Paul, Philemon and Onesimus then. In order to be reconciled to God, we must know that if we repent of our sins and lay them at the foot of the cross where our saviour, Jesus, is ready to pay our debt, God's forgiveness is assured. Of course, we must also be prepared to forgive one another too - reconcile our differences and love one another as the brothers and sisters that we are in Christ Jesus. My examples at the beginning of this talk of people's kindnesses are done out of love, care and empathy with others and may see one person helping one or a few others. How much more wonderful, therefore, is the message that God is prepared to pay the whole world's biggest debt, that of our sin, through the life and death of

Jesus. He certainly didn't need to do this, and we certainly don't deserve it but being the graceful and loving God that he is and wanting to count each and every one of us as his "useful" servants, his sons, and daughters he gave us the huge example of giving, sacrificing, forgiving and grace in his fully divine, fully human son, Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says "He revealed Jesus Christ to us as our Brother, when He won our hearts by His love, this was the beginning of our instruction in divine love. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgement, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meagre our brotherly love, the less were we living by God's mercy and love. Thus, God Himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ". I hope that excites you as much as it does me!

Just to recap on God's plan for us - we saw in the very first sentence of the Bible, back in Genesis chapter 1 that "In the beginning God" - there was nothing else - just God and all the world was created through his Word. Fast forward to John's Gospel and we learn that that same God, in the incarnate form of Jesus, came down to earth "the word made flesh dwelt among us", acknowledging therefore that without doubt Jesus was there "in the beginning" as part of the triune Godhead but who was then sent down to earth taking on a human body whilst maintaining his divinity in order that God's original plan of salvation may be fulfilled. This was definitely not random, but a plan carried out under God's timing and God's Will.

If you're still excited by what we have looked at this morning you will realise that this letter to Philemon is in fact a story of the Gospel in action, but we are faced with a biblical cliff-hanger as we are not told what Philemon's own response to this was. We can only assume that he responded positively and took the transformed Onesimus back into his household not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. I wonder what our response to the gospel will be? Are we prepared to acknowledge that in Christ we have been transformed, that our sins are forgiven even though we did not earn or deserve such grace? Are we going to be useful to God in using our transformed character to tell others the good news of the gospel? We must surely be prepared to walk the walk and not just talk the talk on a Sunday. As Christians we must do our bit to proclaim the Kingdom of God and share our own transformational stories with others.

Amen