

True Freedom

4 September 2022 Deuteronomy 30.15-20
14th after Trinity Philemon 1-21
Revd. Alan Keeler Luke 14.25-33

One small letter

The Bible has been called not so much a book as a library. It consists of a wide variety of types of writing. This morning we heard the book of Philemon read. It is one of the smallest books in the Bible and it has been criticised over the years by people who say it doesn't have anything really weighty in it. On the other hand size is not the most important thing and it sparkles with faith and humanity and illustrates what freedom in Christ is to be about.

Philemon is a letter from Saint Paul to a fellow Christian leader called Philemon. We often call Saint Paul's writings Epistles. This is emphasising that they contain a great deal of weighty thought. They were to be read aloud in churches and for very public consumption. However Philemon is personal both in the way it is written which is to a friend and also it expresses very tenderly the relationship they have.

If there is an issue that is being expressed in some theological way it is about slavery, the freedom that is found in Christ and how this is to be worked out in a very specific situation.

Philemon

The person of Philemon is a church leader who has a close relationship to Saint Paul. In his opening remarks Paul speaks about how Philemon loves fellow Christians and Jesus Christ; all of which Paul greatly commends.

Paul says he prays for Philemon and in their relationship he has found joy and encouragement.

It may be that we are in the habit of writing letters and from time to time have the pleasure in receiving them. A good letter requires great care to prepare. There is quotation that goes "Excuse the long letter, I didn't have time to write a short one" which is attributed to a number of writers. There is of course the fact that having committed yourself paper your thoughts can be read and reread and kept for posterity. Which might be wonderful or call you to account one day!

Paul's approach

Before Paul dives in to the cause of his writing he lays out his approach. Paul is of course a very senior person in the life of the church but he says to Philemon he is not going to command him or demand that he act out of duty. Paul will be making his appeal on the basis of love.

This foundation of love is about Paul and Philemon themselves. They have a shared ministry. But this work is for Jesus Christ and it is his love that they seek to share. How they work out the situation before them is through the life of Christ. But Paul is going to be talking about a third character called Onesimus. This person's status is rather conflicted but the way to approach it is through the love of Christ, as Paul goes on to explain.

Onesimus

One of the huge background issues for the New Testament is the Roman Empire and one of its prime institutions is that a slavery. It may have been that between 10 and 20 percent of people living in the Roman Empire were in slavery. A slave had no rights and had to do all that their master demanded. The master had the power of life and death over their slaves and could be as arbitrary and cruel as they desired. Since the slave had nothing to lose, punishments would be very severe. The practise of crucifixion was designed to be as humiliating and painful as possible to keep the slave population in fear and under control.

Onesimus was a slave who had run away from Philemon. He had met Paul and been converted to Christianity. Paul's letter to Philemon is seeking to work out what the next step will be.

Philemon has Roman legal rights over Onesimus and Paul says he is going to respect those. Paul intends to send Onesimus back to Philemon.

But Paul is wanting to underline that although there are Roman legal rights, as Christians everything has now changed for Philemon and Onesimus. They are now brothers in Christ; and of course so too is Paul.

The big ask

So here is the big demand. Paul says Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul himself.

It is probably very difficult for us to see just how radical this was. Slaves would be considered by the Romans as an inferior category of humanity.

Philemon may well feel deeply disrespected because Onesimus had run away. In addition he has been practically put out as he has not had someone to work in his house. There may also be a great challenge because to step up to Paul's request is going to put him at odds with his well to do neighbours and how they treat their slaves. These neighbours may have no qualms in dealing with their slaves in harsh ways and consider Philemon stupid or scandalous if he were being kind to a slave.

In addition there is the fact that Paul as a good friend who is respecting him and with gentleness calling him to put his faith into practise in a tough way. Paul is putting Philemon on the spot and encouraging him to make the tough decision for himself.

Paul's faith in action

Paul now literally puts his money where his mouth is and says if in some way Philemon is owed anything he will pay it for him. In this Paul is acting as Christ putting forward a sacrifice to establish freedom.

The letter to Philemon is not an overt epistle expressing Christian theology. However the action of welcoming a slave as a brother requested of Philemon and the financial underwriting of the situation by Paul are very much faith made real.

The issues of relationship continue to be expressed because Paul says he will be refreshed in his heart if this all comes to pass. He also asks for a guest room to be prepared so he might visit.

All of these matters are left tantalisingly unresolved. We do not know whether Onesimus returned to Philemon. If he did return did they live as brothers in Christ? Or did Paul visit and find out for himself what took place?

Slavery

But to our modern ears the big question probably is why didn't Saint Paul just demand that Onesimus be made free from being a slave. Freedom is so highly prized in our society. In relatively recent history a few centuries, there has been the Atlantic slave trade and we have been pleased to see it has been abolished.

The actions of the church in the New Testament would never primarily abolitionist. If a person could achieve freedom all well and good. But if they could not they were advised to serve their masters well.

The Church of the New Testament and the early centuries that followed had a very weak position in society. It could include many people who were themselves slaves. The church would be routinely persecuted and would have no means of force to respond. Indeed it would quite often be a secret society so that it could flourish on the margins.

At that time the church did not see itself as having a political presence with a manifesto of how society would change. Jesus spoke of his followers being like salt and light. They were a source of inspiration and enlightenment. Knowing Jesus as their Lord and living by his power and love a new type of humanity was being offered. It was this new type of being alive that was to present an alternative to even obvious way of living like having slaves. Jesus followers were by their lives and testimony to be an invitation for people to discover something fresh. Living with freedom and putting aside slavery could be seen as a better way of life and society

Inspiration

In writing to the churches in Galatia and Colossae Paul said There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female. Philemon is thought to have lived in Colossae and so may have heard Paul's letters read out and know this personal letter of what we call Philemon to be expressing the same thing.

Paul has very high view of what Jesus has done in bringing salvation to the whole world. The church is the beginning of that taking place so that each person might be given the dignity of being fully human. So immense is this vision and such a challenge to the way of our world the Paul sees Jesus as God himself at work to bring this to pass.

Paul does not command Philemon which in a way would not express a free relationship of love. Paul seeks to inspire Philemon to know more of Christ's love both for himself and to share it more deeply. Paul is himself prepared to do what he can by underwriting any financial loss Philemon might have suffered. It is not a bribe but a sharing in Onesimus being given freedom that Paul is so passionate about.

The book of Philemon may be small but it is a very immediate, personal and demanding call to make faith real. Real for each of the people involved. Paul in sharing his Gospel, Philemon in making his faith practical and Onesimus to find it is not just words.

