Sermon: Trinity 12 St Godwald’s

Anyone who has ever seen my handwriting, might live in dread of ever receiving a hand written letter or card from me; to describe it as indecipherable would be generous. But I do enjoy sending a hand written note, however brief, especially to let someone know that they are not forgotten. And one of the reasons I enjoy this, is because of the enormous pleasure I derive when someone else writes to me. In this age of email and twitter, the thoughtful, considered note in a card is unusually precious.

Letters abound in the New Testament of course, but none is quite so wonderful in my eyes than the book of Philemon, the entirety of which we heard read this morning. Here, I believe, we find some of Paul’s finest writing. As I talk, you might like to follow the reading afresh on your red sheets. For the book of Philemon is a study in diplomacy, persuasion and risk management.

The story at the heart of the letter centres on a slave, Onesimus, and his owner, Philemon. Paul is writing from prison and Onesimus appears to have run away – for a reason we’re never told – and finds himself at Paul’s side.

It is important to appreciate that slavery and prison in Paul’s day do not equate with slavery and prison today. Slavery was a largely accepted part of the social system and slave owners had absolute power and control over their slaves. At the same time, slaves could better themselves if they were lucky, and some were even able to own their own property or even win their freedom. In prison meanwhile, certain prisoners, such as Roman citizens like Paul, had rights in prison and especially the right to be attended to by their own slaves. We might miss nuances like these if we just equate slavery and prison with modern notions of exploitation and incarceration.

After Paul’s traditional greeting to Philemon and others in his household – remember, this letter would have been read out to the assembled; it’s not a private letter for Philemon’s eyes alone – Paul begins his persuasive treatise with a long compliment that concludes “I have received much joy and encouragement from your love”.

It's at this point Philemon – and others listening - probably realises that a really big “BUT” is coming…

“It is for this reason”, Paul continues, that I’m not going to tell you what you must do about Onesimus; instead, I’m going to appeal to your better judgement to do the right thing, you know how you can behave but you also know how you should behave. You know what you can get away with, but you also know, why you shouldn’t.

You have to read this letter several times before certain truths become apparent.

Onesimus has run away and found his place beside Paul. Onesimus and Paul have grown close together, like Father and Son. But Paul has reluctantly come to the conclusion to send Onesimus back to Philemon, almost certainly carrying the letter we are now hearing read to us.

Onesimus means useless – and so the man who was useless to Philemon has instead turned out to be very useful indeed to Paul. Might he become useful to Philemon too?

The reason this story is an exercise in risk management, is because death for Onesimus is one option Philemon could consider as a result of Onesimus running away. But instead of acting in Paul and Onesimus’ self-interest and keeping Onesimus with Paul in prison, Paul lays down a challenge to both Philemon and to Onesimus: to Onesimus, the challenge is that he won’t run away a second time on the journey back to Philemon; the challenge to Philemon, of course, is to treat Onesimus well.

Paul appeals to Philemon to make the right choice and not only preserve Onesimus’ life, but give him freedom from his slavery. Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus like a brother; to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul himself.

And just in case there is any doubt about Paul’s sincerity, Paul agrees to pick up the bill if Philemon finds himself out of pocket as a result of Onesimus’ behaviour. A hint perhaps that it was a theft that led to Onesimus running away in the first place.

Paul ends on a note of confidence – he expects Philemon to rise to the challenge and do even more than Paul suggests.

This is a beautiful story for it shows how important it is to take risks if we truly want change. Paul, Onesimus and Philemon all had much to lose if Paul had mis-read Philemon’s likely reaction to Onesimus’ return. But without the risk, Philemon would not have been challenged to act well himself.

The letter also reveals that real change can never be imposed, it must be discovered and embraced willingly by those affected. Paul could have told Philemon what to do, but Paul knew that wasn’t going to lead to personal growth; Philemon needed to make the decision for himself – and by going beyond Paul’s expectations, make that decision truly his own.

Paul’s approach to domestic diplomacy has much to offer the wider stage of today’s world. But there is little sign that the world is willing to listen.

The war in Ukraine is not going to result in a peace both sides can respect on equal terms; there will be peace, of that I have no doubt, but it will be a peace dominated by tension and rooted in physical might.

The industrial disputes sweeping the country and for which I have immense sympathy, are so unequal in the power of shareholders over workers, profit-rich pockets over the need to get bread on the table, that eventually people will return to work, probably more impoverished than they were before.

Party politics in this country, within and between parties, is now so fractious, so driven by the desire for personal power not public service, that democracy is being undermined; truth is silenced below the shouting matches that diminish everybody.

Paul models a different way of relating; he asks us to expect more of ourselves and one another; calls us to a higher standard of behaviour than the world around us.

And with a clarity that pierces the noise of troubled times, Paul suggests that this all begins at home; within the family of the church; amongst people who are friends.

Yet again we are reminded that however justifiable our moans about the behaviour of others in public life, the behaviour of ourselves in the micro world of our homes, our churches and our neighbourhoods is the benchmark by which we will be assessed.

Which is why how we as churches respond to the “Cost of Living” Crisis is so very important. In just over a week’s time the PCC will meet to discuss how we should respond, both to the crisis we face as churches and to the crisis faced by our communities. I am expecting the PCC to want all of our churches to act creatively, decisively and generously, in the belief that this may be our moment of true service.

May God bless those discussions and the discernment process that will follow; may they be filled with the wisdom Paul showed as he carefully negotiated a route by which Philemon and Onesimus might grow stronger in the faith together. Amen.