**#52 4 September 2022 (SG BCP) Trinity 12 by Rev Richard Sandland**

**The Letter to Philemon**

**Salutation**

**1**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, **2**to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house:

**3**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Philemon’s Love and Faith**

**4**When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God **5**because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. **6**I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. **7**I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

### **Paul’s Plea for Onesimus**

**8**For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, **9**yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.**10**I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. **11**Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. **12**I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. **13**I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; **14**but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. **15**Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, **16**no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

**17**So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18**If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19**I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. **20**Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. **21**Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

**22**One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

### **Final Greetings and Benediction**

**23**Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, **24**and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow-workers.

**25**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

# Luke 14:25-33

# NRSV (U)

### The Cost of Discipleship

**25**Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them, **26**“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. **27**Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. **28**For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? **29**Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, **30**saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ **31**Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? **32**If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. **33**So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

I like the letter to Philemon.

I get that spine-tingling feeling of *being there*; I think that we here have a snapshot of Paul, of people around Paul, and a little of what was going on amongst Christ’s people just 30 years after he died. This feels like a private letter, it’s less flamboyant than some of the great, overtly public set-pieces of other letters, like Romans or Hebrews. It’s a domestic note.

The letter is bookended by lists of people – Paul is writing to Philemon, of course, but also expects greetings to go to Apphia, to Archippus and to the whole of the church community, who meet in Philemon’s house.

At his end, Paul is writing from prison. In Acts 8:3, and elsewhere, Paul is happy to commit others to prison for following Christ. Previously Saul, of course, and in his early life a ruthless persecutor of Christians, he was famously converted whilst travelling on the road to Damascus by some sort of personal, vivid encounter with Christ; he realised that he’d been wrong all of his life, and, from that point onwards, felt that he must speak out the Good News. He was forgiven; I, you, and Paul on the Damascus Road are all recipients of the unmeasured, freely given, undeserved forgiveness of God. What we receive is what we call, in shorthand, God’s grace. And the Letter to Philemon is all about forgiveness.

The red sheet ends 4 verses short of the end of Philemon – it is only 25 verses long – and we’re told much in those additional four lines. As he writes, Paul, the imprisoner, is himself imprisoned for his beliefs. And in a snapshot of his life in prison, he sends greetings to Philemon and the rest from his fellow prisoners; from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke the Evangelist. All prisoners, all people of faith, whose greetings are sent to free people of faith in Colossae. But there is one more person – the slave Onesimus, who’s mentioned half-way through the letter.

Paul here asks for grace for a slave.

Paul has converted Onesimus (whose name means ‘useful’) while in prison. It also seems that, in a word-play on his name, that Onesimus is known to Philemon; ‘Formerly he was useless to you but now he is useful both to you and to me…’. I love Paul’s letters for these intimate views. The church met in Philemon’s house, and it seems that Onesimus was at one time slave in that household; ‘You might have him back’, says Paul, ‘No longer as a slave…but as a beloved brother’. Why he was in prison alongside Paul isn’t known; Its quite a way from Colossae to Rome, abut 2000km – how did he get there?

So, as we delve, we are becoming aware of not knowing a story; some say Onesimus ran away from Philemon, others that he was visiting Paul in prison on Philemon’s behalf. But in common with what Jesus says in our Luke reading, Philemon is being asked to give up a *possession*. Something has happened for Paul to emphasise the need for Christian forgiveness; ‘if he has wronged you…or owes you anything, charge that to my account.’ Onesimus features in the Letter to the Colossians too, with Paul saying in Chapter 4 that Onesimus will accompany Tychius on the journey from Rome to Colossae. So it’s likely that our letter to Philemon and the one to the Colossians were written together, transported and delivered at the same time, by Tychius and Onesimus.

Did Tychius travel in confidence on that journey, and did Onesimus travel with a worry on his heart? He’s travelling with Paul’s appeal to Philemon in his pocket, Paul’s wish that he, Onesimus, is forgiven for whatever has taken place, and more, that he is made free, in Christ. We can imagine the scene – Onesimus, after a long journey, hands our letter to Philemon; the church meets in that place, so perhaps is an imposing, intimidating house, and if he *was* a slave who ran away, perhaps it might have unhappy memories; perhaps something happened that made Onesimus expect Philemon to be angry. Punishing an insolent slave was to preserve the social order. It would be the right thing to do, to punish him…

So he hands the letter over, and stands back while Philemon reads it; I imagine Philemon walking about as he reads, with mixed emotions, glancing over his shoulder at Onesimus who was probably wishing that the world might swallow him up; if he HAD run away, he wonders why he didn’t just keep running. How did he get into this …mess? And would Philemon do as Paul asks?

Paul is asking for forgiveness, like he received on the Damascus Road; no doubt Philemon had heard and marvelled at that story many times. Now, Paul is asking for Onesimus to be a slave no longer, but a beloved brother. In asking Philemon to ‘prepare a room for me’, as we see in verse 22, he is also asking for the *same acceptance* for this slave, living in a spirit of forgiveness and love so that Onesimus, as well as Paul, might have somewhere to lay their head.

So, rather than being a rather ordinary domestic letter as it first seems, we here witness the establishing of the essence of our faith, seen at its formative time; Jesus died just 30 years ago. We see an early Christian, Philemon, being tested in that faith. Paul asks Philemon to demonstrate the absolute fundamentals of forgiveness, hospitality, of love and the passing on of God’s grace, as Paul wishes to him; ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.’ Paul implicitly asks for that grace for Onesimus too.

Can Philemon carry the cross, give up a possession, ignore the cost, and truly be a disciple of Christ?

Could we?

Amen