

A sensitive matter: the story of Philemon and Onesimus

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A sermon given on Sunday 4th September 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Philemon 1-25**, Luke 14:25-33
(NB lectionary has only Philemon 1-21)

Introduction

Imagine it's June. A Christian couple who are good friends of yours and who live the other side of the country have a teenage daughter, Amy, who's been doing her GCSE's. You know that Amy and her parents have a difficult relationship, and schoolwork has been a source of conflict for several years. One evening, out of the blue, there's a ring at your door, and there, with a small suitcase, is Amy. You invite her in, and as she begins to talk over a cup of tea it emerges that her relationship with her parents has broken down: there's been a big argument at home and Amy has stormed out. You get her agreement to phone her parents to let them know she's safe and with you, and offer for her to stay with you for a few weeks, to let the situation calm down.

Amy is still with you 2 months later when she gets her GCSE results by e-mail. She's not got the grades she needed to take up her place at sixth form college. She doesn't seem overly bothered, as she's thinking of taking up a more practical career and is talking about going to an FE college to study photography. But more important, she's been coming to church with you, has met your church youthworker and seems to have made a clear commitment to follow Jesus Christ.

You know that Amy needs to go back home. You've been praying about her a lot, and what you long for is that Amy and her parents can be reconciled and that she can start afresh at college and make something of her life. You also hope that she'll get stuck into church now that the Christian faith has become meaningful to her, and you wonder how supportive the members of her parents' church will be. Her mother is a churchwarden, and other adult members have been aware of the difficulties in the family. You encourage Amy to go back, and say that you'll write her parents a letter to help them understand that she's been doing a lot of thinking while she's been away, has become a Christian and wants to make a go of her life. You hope they'll be willing to forgive her for the unkind words she has spoken and her past behaviour, and will give her more space to develop as an adult and rebuild a relationship of trust with her. You remember that Amy's name comes from the French for "loved". Amy has come to experience God's love for her and it has begun to change her. You hope her parents will rediscover how to show their love for her in a way that helps her grow into the person God meant her to be.

You sit down to write the letter. What are you going to say?

You may not have had to face a situation quite like this one, but you will certainly have been in a position where you tried to mediate between two people who couldn't get on, whether in your family, or at work, or between friends. Or you may have been in a situation where the conflict was between you and another person. What difference does a Christian perspective make to what you think you should be trying to achieve? How do Christian beliefs guide the way we should relate to the people involved?

Philemon and Onesimus

I've told you that made-up story about Amy to try to set the scene for St Paul's letter to Philemon which we heard read earlier. You might have wondered why we were reading this obscure letter about some slave and his master in the ancient world. But the letter shows us that the Bible deals with real people facing real human problems. Although we might not have to deal with exactly the

same situation that Paul is addressing, there are similarities with the imaginary scenario with Amy and her parents: a relationship has been broken and needs to be put right. As we explore it together, let's see how Paul deals with it, and what are the principles that guide him.

Everything we know about the story of Philemon and Onesimus comes from the letter itself and from some references in Paul's letter to the Colossians, which seems to have been sent at the same time.

Philemon is a wealthy Christian who lives in Colossae, where Epaphras, a co-worker of Paul's, had founded a church. Paul knew Philemon personally, and it seems from verse 19 that he had probably been converted through him. We know that Philemon must have been fairly wealthy, as his house was clearly big enough to be used as a meeting place for one of the house groups in the Colossian church. (This was where Sunday meetings took place in the early church, long before there were any church buildings.) It is also likely that Philemon had some kind of leadership role in the church.

Like all wealthy people in the Roman Empire, Philemon had slaves. Slavery was part and parcel of life in the ancient world. I would expect that, as a Christian, he treated them well and fairly. But they were none-the-less slaves.

It seems that one of Philemon's slaves called Onesimus had run away and reached Paul who, as we see from verses 1, 10 and 13, was currently in prison (either in Ephesus or in Rome). Through Paul's influence, Onesimus had become a Christian. Philemon was a close friend of Paul. It was clear to Paul that the right thing was for Onesimus to go back to Philemon. But how would he be received? Runaway slaves were usually punished severely in the Roman Empire, often with death. In addition, it seems likely from verse 18 that Onesimus had stolen money from his master, probably in order to finance his travel away from Colossae. If you were Onesimus, would you want to go back?

Putting things right

But it is clear that Onesimus has agreed to go back to Colossae. Paul longs for reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon. That in itself sounds as though it might not be easy. But more than that, Paul longs for Onesimus to grow in his faith and find a role within the church in Colossae – within the same church community of which his owner Philemon is a leading member. Onesimus has been changed by becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. What changes are needed in Philemon for him to accept his once disobedient slave as a fellow Christian, a brother in God's family?

Paul knows that his letter is key to what happens when Onesimus gets back to Colossae. Fortunately, his trusty co-worker Tychicus is going to accompany Onesimus back, and will carry the letter to Philemon together with Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. It would be really worth reading the last chapter of that letter to the Colossians to get a sense of Paul's relationships with the individuals he worked with. In particular, you'll see that in those verses he describes Onesimus as “our faithful and dear brother” (Colossians 4:9). Paul is clearly hopeful that things are going to work out for the best.

Paul's task in his personal letter to Philemon is to help Philemon to adopt a new attitude to Onesimus. Onesimus's name means “useful”, and Paul wants Philemon to value him as useful not only as a slave but as a servant of the Gospel. Paul's own respect for Onesimus is shown in verse 10 where he describes him as “my son” and “my very heart”.

Paul appeals to Philemon to look on Onesimus as a Christian brother. And so in verses 15 to 16 Paul writes,

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever– no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

I don't know what your thoughts were as you listened to the letter being read. Perhaps you felt that Paul was being manipulative. Perhaps you've been asking yourself, why Paul doesn't denounce slavery as unethical and tell Philemon and other slave-owners to set all their slaves free?

We can't spend much time on that issue now. Tom Wright in his commentary says that slavery was so ingrained in the social structure that leading a campaign against it would not only have been completely ineffective but “it would, without a doubt have done more harm than good, making life harder for Christian slaves, and drawing upon the young church exactly the wrong sort of attention from the authorities.”¹ And not all slaves would have been economically more secure if they were freed.

Rowan Williams in his excellent and readable book *Meeting God in Paul*² argues that in fact Paul's radical teaching about the way God welcomes all people through Jesus Christ challenges the way people are discriminated against on the basis of their race, gender or social status and thus ultimately undermines the whole institution of slavery. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul puts it like this:

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:11, NIV).

He continues:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14, NIV)

In other words, believing that everyone is equal in God's sight isn't just a nice theory that makes us feel morally good. We need to put it into practice by exercising Christian compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and love in our relationships with each other. For Philemon that meant looking beyond the wrong that Onesimus had done him, and beyond their relationship of master and slave to a new way of thinking of him as a Christian brother who could be useful not only to Philemon but to the work of Christ. Perhaps also there is a hint of what more Philemon could do for Onesimus when Paul writes in verse 21 of his personal letter *Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. I wonder whether Onesimus got his freedom?*

Putting it into practice

The letter of Paul to Philemon raises a number of issues. But at the heart of it we find Paul seeking to mediate reconciliation between two estranged people, with a very unequal balance of power. He has personal loyalties to both, but what he wants above all is for both to see each other as God sees them. I wonder what situations you have been in where you have tried to mediate in a damaged relationship? Have you been the wronged party, or have you caused hurt to another person? Human relationships are complicated, and often unequally balanced. Feelings may run high, and the cost of forgiving, or seeking forgiveness, may seem high. What would it mean to treat others as people for whom Christ died? Are we willing to pay the price required to help others find reconciliation, or to be reconciled ourselves to another person?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus challenges those who want to be his disciples to recognise that following him can be costly. But the reference to “taking up your cross” reminds us that Jesus was willing to pay the ultimate price so that we could be reconciled to God and have a relationship with him. God's desire is that we should be at peace with him and with each other. Seen in this perspective, the time and trouble we may need in order to seek his will for situations of conflict and bring reconciliation is not a lot to ask. We need to ask God to help us look above the

1 N.T. Wright *Colossians and Philemon* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1986)

2 Rowan Williams *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK 2015)

complexities and beyond the hurt to see what he would like to bring out of the situation. And then let us ask for his wisdom, grace and strength to do what is needed to bring about healing and peace.

Perhaps there is little that we feel we can personally do to bring about reconciliation in a particular situation. But perhaps we can give support to one of those involved. In all cases we can pray. And of course, these principles apply not only to conflicts between individuals: the principles of Christian reconciliation apply to conflicts on a much bigger scale. For example, the new nation of South Sudan has been involved in civil war for most of its existence. Christianity is the main religion there. Perhaps we can pray for Church leaders on both sides of the conflict to have the wisdom and courage to argue for mutual respect, reconciliation and peace, and by persuasion put an end to the war.

Let us finish with a prayer.

Lord, you know us better than we know ourselves, and you understand all the complexities of our lives and our relationships with each other. Thank you for the gift of Jesus and for the sacrifice he made to bring us peace with you. Give us your wisdom and your grace, that we too may be agents of your peace in this world, for Jesus' sake. Amen.