

From Slave to Brother

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 4 September 2022, by David Gill. Readings for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost were Jeremiah 18:1-11, Philemon 1:1-21 and St Luke 14:25-33

Today's second reading, all but four verses of one of the shortest books in the Bible, comes from the pen of St Paul.

Paul's other letters were sent to Christian communities -- congregations in Corinth, Rome, Galatia, wherever. This one alone is addressed to an individual, a respected friend. It packs quite a punch.

The name of the intended recipient was ... yes, Philemon! A follower of Jesus of Nazareth, he seems to have been relatively well-healed. He owned a house, where Christians gathered. He also had a slave, and slaves did not come cheap. The slave was named Onesimus, which means "useful". How would you like a name like Useful? Better than being called Useless, I guess, but not much. We talk that way about a bottle opener or a dustpan. It's no way to talk about a human being. But it's probably the way they thought about slaves.

This particular slave was in trouble, BIG trouble. Onesimus had absconded, run away from his owner. Now that was serious. Runaway slaves could get the death penalty. The letter hints that he may have stolen something too.

Somewhere along the line, Paul had met Onesimus. Maybe in jail, during one of the apostle's several stints behind bars. Maybe elsewhere. Anyway, as a result of their encounter, the slave had become a Christian.

So Paul writes this letter. He wants Onesimus to go back to his owner. And he wants Philemon to receive him back – not as a slave, but as "a beloved brother". Welcome him as you would welcome me, says Paul, and if he has wronged you in any way I will look after it.

Now that was a big ask. Paul wanted Philemon to act counter to common sense, counter to the prevailing culture, counter to what everyone knew was right and just.

Reading about it today, of course, we wish Paul had set his sights even higher. Slavery ran right through the Roman empire. Why couldn't he have been a sort of biblical William Wilberforce and started a campaign against the whole evil system?

But that is to wish too much. Slavery is an example of how people then saw some issues quite differently from the way we see them now. The human race, thank God, has made some progress in two thousand years!

In those days, slavery was pervasive. Everyone either knew a slave, possessed a slave, or was a slave. Some people owned other people -- it was natural, it was normal, it was the way the world worked.

Paul did not overthrow slavery in the Roman empire. But he did try to overthrow slavery between Philemon and Onesimus. Why? Because both had become followers of the man of the cross, and he believed that should break down the humanly insurmountable difference between them.

Paul had stated the principle in his letter to the churches in Galatia. Among those baptised into Christ, he wrote, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

So what happened? Did Philemon comply? Tantalisingly, we do not know. But we do have the letter, which the church in its wisdom decided to include among our sacred writings. Evidently it was deemed important, because of the light it cast on what the Christian life entails.

It remains important still. For two reasons.

First, slavery in one form or another remains a reality in this broken world. We like to think it's all past and done with. Not true. Usually stemming from extreme poverty, tens of millions are caught up in forms of control and exploitation that are the "slavery" of our time.

Second, beyond slavery as such, human beings still seem to relish sticking labels on one another, putting each other in boxes, drawing lines, building walls, defining those who matter over against those who don't.

We had an example of this last week, from one of our Uniting Church schools. Some idiots at Knox apparently used the internet to toss around perjorative labels, proclaiming their racism, anti-semitism, misogyny and homophobia. To the man of Nazareth, such labels meant nothing. Such boxes did not exist. Such lines were invisible. Such walls were broken down. To him everyone mattered, all were one.

The same must be true, Paul believed, for Christ's followers. Their relationship with the risen Lord must find expression in transformed relationships between themselves. With consequences that, still today, can sometimes be pretty startling.

An example from the life story of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His autobiography tells of a crucial moment, a turning point, in his life.

Young Desmond was a schoolboy, in the early days of apartheid. One day, walking with his mother in one of South Africa's black townships, they were overtaken by a white man, an Anglican priest who Desmond remembers was

wearing a big black hat and the white cassock of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection. The priest greeted Mrs Tutu – and took off his hat to her. “You could have knocked me down with a feather,” writes Desmond. “He doffed his hat to my mother. Now that seemed a perfectly normal thing I suppose for him, but for me, it was almost mind-boggling, that a white man could doff his hat to my mother, a black woman, really a nonentity in South Africa’s terms.” For the boy, it was a life-changing glimpse of a different kind of world. It was also his first remembered encounter with the Community of the Resurrection, a religious order that would have a crucial influence on his life and, through him and others, on the future of South Africa.

Yes, St Paul was only writing about ending a master/slave relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. But maybe, just maybe, those who would struggle to end slavery many centuries later owed more to him than they realised.

And yes, what impressed young Desmond Tutu was just one white man showing respect to one black woman. But maybe, just maybe, those who would struggle to end apartheid in South Africa owed more to that priest’s hat than they knew. And yes, confronted by the divisions and hostilities of our time there’s precious little you and I can do to change anything. But maybe, just maybe, our hopes, our dreams, our small actions can point the way towards a different kind of church, living for a different kind of nation, striving for a different kind of world. And so, to the supper of the Lord.

Each month, we gather at this holy table. The table is small. There aren’t many of us. And what do we have? Some memories. Some songs. Some bread and wine. Brought together in a simple ritual that links us with another small group that gathered in an upper room long years ago. It’s not much.

But maybe, just maybe, it’s enough. Enough to take us back, to the self-giving love, the dying and the rising, of the saviour of the world.

Enough to take us forward to what he foreshadowed: the great feast of God’s kingdom where there will be no more slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, rich or poor, people who matter or people who don’t.

Where *all* will have a place, *all* will be accepted, *all* will find their enduring home.

May it be so.

*