



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 12th Sunday after Trinity Proper 18 Year C

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14.25-33

I am very fond of the 'Brother Cadfael' novels by Ellis Peters. Brother Cadfael is a monk at the Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul in Shrewsbury. The novels are mediaeval 'whodunits' but they are much more than that; the theology contained within them is often quite profound. There are something like twenty novels and eventually Ellis Peters wrote, 'A Rare Benedictine' the story of how Cadfael came to join the order, giving up his life as both soldier and sailor. In that book are other short stories, one concerns a runaway serf. The feudal system was the established order of society. Everyone had their overlord whom they had to obey. At the top was the king and below him the barons and so on. At the bottom of society was the serf. Basically he was a slave owned by his master; he was his property. In this story the serf escapes from his master who is cruel and ruthless, if found of course he could have been executed. It is a world order that to us is terrible, slavery is abhorrent but then it was the accepted norm. If we stop to think of it slavery was not abolished, without long campaigning in England, until 1833 but it went on for much longer.

Slavery was the accepted norm in the world of St. Paul. Everyone of any standing had slaves; they were their property and without them they believed society wouldn't function properly. It was a natural part of life. The letter to Philemon is about an escaped slave. It was written while Paul was imprisoned at Ephesus.

On the surface this letter is a straightforward plea to Philemon but it is rooted in Christian teaching. Philemon is a man of some standing, he owns slaves, and one of them, Onesimus has run away, maybe taking money and has escaped to Ephesus. Paul is writing to Philemon with the promise that he will send Onesimus back to him asking for him to be accepted as a brother. This seems as mad as Cadfael offering to send the escaped serf back to Hammo FitzHamon but the difference is that Philemon is a devout Christian and Paul appeals to him as such. It is still a difficult thing to ask, to Philemon it is entirely counter cultural and Paul knows it. It goes against the accepted strata of

society but Christianity is counter cultural in many ways. Paul has to get Philemon on side. The letter begins with the traditional greeting.

¹ 'Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to 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.'

Right from the start the greeting is friendly and Paul sees Philemon as a fellow worker for Christ. He greets his wife Apphia and Archippus, probably his son and a fellow Christian. So far so good, there now follows sincere praise of Philemon. Paul puts prayer at the centre, so often his letters begin like this. He states that he prays for the new community and for God's blessing on them.

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. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.'

Philemon gathers the community of Christians in his house at Colossae. Paul is delighted by the reports he has heard, not only of his faith and that of his fellow Christians but also because Philemon is a good example to them and has encouraged them in their faith. The verse which is the crux of the matter is this one, 'I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.' Christianity is not just about preaching or teaching about Jesus, it is 'effective' when it is a living, working, practical reality. Christianity must be lived out. What we say we must do. In other words true Christianity is measured by how a person behaves, in their attitude to God and one another. Paul is talking about applied theology.

Having made this clear Paul comes to the reason that he is writing,

⁸ 'For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet 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.'

Paul could have used his authority as leader of the church to command Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother rather than a slave, with no retribution. It is, as he puts it, his 'duty' to do so. However, Paul has no wish to do this but rather he appeals to Philemon as a Christian. As such he has sworn to follow Christ's commandment to, 'Love one another as I have loved you,' and must remember the words 'Whatever you do to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters you do also to me.' Yes Christians are in the world but not of it. The accepted world order has changed and they must live by the word of Jesus. Paul is not attempting revolution, there are slaves, that is fact of life but in God's eyes all are equal. All Christians are brothers and sisters, part of the body of Christ. Also the changed circumstances concerning the slave Onesimus are vitally important and this is why he is writing to Philemon.

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.'

We will never know the circumstances for sure but it appears that Onesimus ran away from Philemon's household, maybe taking money with him. The reason for his absconding we will never know. From Colossae he made his way to Ephesus and here he came into contact with Paul who was imprisoned there. It appears that he served Paul faithfully, becoming a part of the Christian community. Paul calling himself his 'father' shows his love for Onesimus. There is word play in the

letter now because Onesimus' name actually means 'useful.' He has been invaluable to Paul in his imprisonment. Now he is a central member of the Christian church and as such a child of God. Philemon has got to learn to look at life and to see it not through the world's eyes but the eyes of Christ. He has got to act as Jesus would have acted not according to the ways of accepted society.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.'

Onesimus is not your normal runaway; he might have been once, but no longer. He has become devoted to Paul; he is a fine Christian and such a brother in Christ to Philemon. This quotation illustrates the love Paul has for him calling him 'my own heart'; I cannot remember hearing Paul speak with such love before. Onesimus is a changed man and Paul longs to keep him serving him in prison and thus being of great help and comfort to Paul. However Paul will not put his own needs first; right must be done and, though Onesimus is in danger, Paul must send him home. However Paul expects the 'good deed' to be done by Philemon voluntarily, he doesn't want to force him. This is his opportunity to show that he is acting in a truly Christian way. The point is that in the eyes of God 'there is neither slave nor free, Jew or Gentile' In fact all believers are co-heirs with Christ and children of God; they are brothers and sisters of Christ and each other. That is true and binding and must be lived out in action. So now here is Philemon's test from Paul. Will you act as a Christian and take him back in love?

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.'

Paul wishes Philemon to accept Onesimus back, not as a slave to punish, but as a beloved brother and an inheritor with him of all the promises of Jesus. Onesimus can be of use too in spreading the gospel of Christ. He is a fine Christian and as dear as a son to Paul. He can be so to Philemon.

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.

It is interesting that Paul specifies that he is writing the letter in his own hand. Usually it would be a scribe who would take it down. Not so here because the request is so dear to his heart; Paul is writing to Philemon appealing not only to his better nature, he is a good and loving man, but as a brother in Christ both to himself and to Onesimus. His language is so sincere and phrases such as 'welcome him as you would me' are full of Paul's love for the man. It isn't a matter of letting him off, it is welcoming him with the same reverence as he would Paul himself. He is a child of Christ and we are all one in Christ's eyes, we are all brothers and sisters, there is no status in Christ. Anything he owes, (maybe Paul is referring to the money), Paul will pay but there is also the subtle hint that Philemon owes everything to Paul from whom he received the good news of the gospel. Paul, an old man in prison, asks that Philemon will 'refresh my heart' by the news that he has taken Onesimus in as a dear friend of Paul to the heart of his family in love. Paul ends by saying he has full confidence that his wish will be carried out to the letter because of Philemon's duty to Christ and obedience to both him and Paul.

We do not know what happened but the fact that the letter exists indicates that Paul's request was carried out by Philemon. We also have another reference to Onesimus, Colossians 4:7–9, where he is referred to as a 'faithful and beloved brother', an example to all Christians.

'All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord: ⁸ Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; ⁹ With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.'

I find this letter very moving. Christ has turned lives around. Onesimus a runaway slave is now a servant like a 'son' to Paul, he has devoted himself to Paul in prison. He is a co-worker for Christ. Philemon is given the chance by Paul to show his Christianity by his action in brotherly love to Onesimus. Paul himself shows such tenderness to this young man calling him, 'my heart.' Christian love pervades the whole letter.

We are all children of Christ and equal in the sight of God whatever our calling or place in society. There must, as Jesus said, be no, 'Lording it over one another.' This is Paul's point, we are all equally valued by Christ and must respect and care for each other.

So we turn to the gospel passage, at first sight a startling even a shocking one. We are not used to Jesus talking in this way.

My career was as a secondary school teacher of English until I retired early to work as an NSM priest. One of the staff I worked with used to do some consultancy work which meant going to give talks to other teachers of literature and to discuss teaching methods. One of those talks was called, 'Fire in the stock room,' I never heard it myself but it challenged people to think which work of literature they would choose to save out of all the gems within and to think about why they would do so. It wasn't to be just their favourite book but one which would be of most value to the pupils. It could be for a number of reasons such as the wonderful use of language and imagery the author used or the subject of the work, its philosophy or value to humanity. Without doubt my choice would have been the war poems of Wilfred Owen but I would have dearly wanted to smuggle out, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in my other pocket. Maybe that is the key to this passage from Luke, you simply can't have everything, or put another way, what is it you value most? You have one chance; choose, there is a fire in the stockroom. It's an emergency so here is the challenge, time is short, decide.

Well time is short for Jesus too and short for the nation of Israel. There are only three short years in which he can bring the good news of God to the Jewish nation, three short years before he will be taken away and killed by the very people he is trying to save. He is the fulfilment of the scriptures, the long awaited Messiah and he brings the chance of a new life for the nation. They have a choice, will they choose him? That is the challenge to them. What is it they value most?

This is not an easy passage to read, the language is extremely hard hitting.

²⁵ 'Now large crowds were travelling 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.'

The large crowd listening to him would have been stunned. This turns the accepted world values upside down. This is not the accepted behaviour, family units mean everything. To begin with this seemed the absolute antithesis to the passage from Philemon which is full of love and tenderness.

But in a way it is not at all. Paul is issuing a challenge to Philemon, what is more important to you your Christian beliefs and living them out in action or the punishment of a runaway slave who is now your brother in Christ? Choose! Paul is turning the accepted ways of the world upside down because that is exactly what Jesus did. His is the new way, the way of God. It is the way that will lead Jesus to suffering and to death but Easter Day will follow Good Friday; Jesus will rise from the dead and win eternal life for all Christians. Jesus is the incarnate God, human and divine who walked with humanity. His mission was to bring the good news to the Jewish nation, to tell them that he is the Messiah, the one they have been waiting for, that he has come to overthrow the old order and bring in the new order of God. He is living the kingdom values and now is the chance to turn to him and follow him. This is an emergency, time is so short so what will they choose? They can't have split loyalties, split values, will it be the old ways or Jesus' new way of life.

The passage I have quoted looks very callous. It isn't, we cannot all leave our families and go off to join a religious community. Remember this passage from Mark 3,

'Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' ³³And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Yet it is Jesus who, in his agony, commends his mother in love to St. John. Jesus is not saying that the love within a family is wrong, the family unit binds society together, and love is the key to life. Jesus is issuing a challenge to the Jews listening to him and indeed to us, to get our priorities right. Jesus is telling them that time is short. However in extremes they might have to turn away from family, says Jesus. Think of what he has said about brothers and fathers betraying each other to death because of Christian belief. Life for the Christian, says Jesus, is fraught with danger

²⁷ 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.'

This is not just about carrying burdens for Jesus; this is not just a saying, it is a reality. So many of the early Christians were persecuted and so many would be killed most horribly. Indeed this has been true throughout history to the present day. It is hard for us now to imagine this but in so many countries this is still a fact of daily life.

Jesus issues this challenge to the Jews and to all who would follow him, what do you choose, what is your priority? There is no room for half and half measure for Christians you must fully commit. Have you the courage to walk the way of danger and death because that may be what is required? It is the challenge Jesus gives to all of us. Jesus' way challenges the old values and people don't like their world order being challenged. People don't like it when someone stands up for the truth and condemns what they are doing as wrong. It will lead to conflict, it may lead to persecution, it may mean death. But Jesus' message is clear, 'Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?' but think carefully of the cost of discipleship.'

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, ³⁰saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Firstly Jesus states facts using an illustration. If you are going to follow me you must fully understand the cost. If anyone embarks on any project they work out the cost in money and labour. They sort out the expense and ask themselves if they can afford it, if not, if they have any sense they won't

embark on it. Well the illustration holds true. Jesus is honestly telling the crowds the truth, if you turn to me this is what you must expect. Will you commit wholeheartedly? Jesus knows time is short, he has preached the message, now is the time to choose. That challenge echoes down the ages to Christian. Christianity must be a way of life; Jesus' teachings are our focus. Christianity is not something to get out of a box on Sunday while we live our lives for ourselves the rest of the time. You cannot serve two masters with impartiality, says Jesus.

There are echoes too in the illustration Jesus uses of the Temple, the centre of Jewish worship. It was destroyed by the Babylonians and naturally was the focus again after the exile. The breathtaking Temple built by Herod the Great was beautified by his descendants; building was always going on there. But Jesus knew that in a few years the Temple would be nothing but rubble destroyed by the Romans in A.D 70 after a futile rebellion. So we have the next illustration.

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? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.'

This is a message for all would be war lords but it is much more than that. Think of the consequences before you act, Jesus is bringing the way of truth and love and peace. This is Israel's chance to turn to him; this is an emergency, he will not come again. He brings the words of life; his actions at Calvary will save humanity. Will they accept him as the Messiah, the one who fulfils the law and the prophets, will they turn to him? As with that fire in the stock cupboard there is no time to prevaricate, it's time to choose the thing most precious to them. Will they cling to the old ways, the ways that have drifted far from God or will they choose Jesus the Messiah? Their saviour stands before them.

His way is the way of peace, tragically the vast majority will turn their backs on him, they will follow the old ways and nationalistic fervour will lead them to rebel against their Roman overlords. They have no conception of the might of the Roman war machine. They, unlike the King in the story, go to battle with disastrous consequences for the nation and the Temple, which is raised to the ground. All this could have been avoided if they had turned to Jesus. Peace not war, love not hate has to be the focus. To go back to Philemon, he must learn the love of Jesus and put it into action in his daily life. To be a Christian you must fully commit, you cannot say you follow Jesus if you are self-centred and simply do your own thing. In that way we put our own wills to the back and turn to Jesus' way. 'Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?' sums it up rather well.

To be a Christian is not easy, our commission is not easy. Jesus' own life was anything but easy but he followed God's word in obedience. At Calvary he conquered death and sin forever and he won eternal life in the renewed kingdom of God for all who have turned to him. We are never alone; the Holy Spirit of God is with us always to strengthen and to sustain us in times of trouble and in times of joy.

And lo I am with you always even until the end of the age.

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