

Philemon

4 9 16

God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love;
grant that your people may be fervent
in the fellowship of the gospel
that always abiding in you
they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service.

Our text today may be found in Paul's letter to Philemon, verse 8:

**'I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty
yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.'**

Only one book of the New Testament, only one book in our Bible, is short enough to be read in almost its entirety as one of our readings at Holy Communion. And Paul's letter to Philemon is indeed that short – one chapter, just 25 verses long of which you've just heard 21 of them !

Paul is in prison in Rome. He feels old. But he is still active in thanks and prayer and encouragement. For these reasons, he's writing directly to Philemon in Colosse, to someone he's brought to faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of Man. Philemon has established a church in his home and is a co-worker for Christ, someone who is supporting Paul's work through prayer.

And now to the heart of the letter. Paul, in prison, has been fortunate enough to have been given a spiritual son – Onesimus. Onesimus is a runaway slave, possibly a thief, and he's run away from Philemon's household. Under Roman Law, Onesimus is, therefore, Philemon's property and it is a criminal offence for Paul to harbour him. How best to resolve the problem? Paul would dearly love to keep his new-found son with him to be of service to him but it is important to take the opportunity to do the right thing.

And what is the right thing to do? That Onesimus is restored to Philemon and that Philemon forgive his slave his past wrong-doing and embrace him not only as a servant restored to his household but also welcome him home as a brother in Christ, as a fellow believer who has been touched and changed by the love of God through belief in Jesus, God's Son.

There is a pun, a play on words, with the meaning of Onesimus's name in Greek which means 'profitable'. The slave who in the past has been useless, clearly unprofitable, is now going to live up to his name which Bishop Tom Wright translates as 'Mr Useful'. In the past, he's actually been pretty useless but now he's changed and can now be truly useful indeed. And if tradition is true that Onesimus became the bishop of Ephesus, mentioned by name in one of the letters of Ignatius the Martyr, then perhaps Onesimus did become truly useful, not least by preserving Paul's personal letter to the Philemon for the future benefit of the Church as a whole.

And the value of the letter ? The chance for Philemon to show forgiveness and for Onesimus to be forgiven. Like the Prodigal Son, Onesimus has come to his senses and is returning home to his master to ask for forgiveness. Philemon has chance to show God's forgiveness to someone who has wronged him and to welcome Paul's son in Christ back home as a brother in Christ. Forgiving and being forgiven is at the heart of our faith.

But let me end with our text today: **'I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.'** Paul, as an Apostle, is in a position of authority and he could tell Philemon what to do. But he would rather Philemon make up his own mind and, of his own free will and accord, do the right thing because he himself chooses to do so. As a teacher, the best learning comes because the student wants to learn not because he's being told to do so by me, his teacher.

So what do you think of Paul's letter to Philemon, the shortest book in the Bible ? Pithy – well worth the hearing, well worth reading again at home for yourself ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

4th September 2016

