



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

23rd Sunday Year C

Welcome him not as a slave but as a brother

Readings: Wisdom 9: 13-18, Ps 89, Philemon 9-10, 12-17, Luke 14: 25-33

It's less than a page long. If you don't know where to find it you will miss it. It's sandwiched between St. Paul's letter to Titus and the great letter to the Hebrews. It is, however, one of the most powerful and profound letters ever penned. It rejoices in the title, St. Paul's letter to Philemon.

Philemon (his name means 'affectionate') is a businessman, probably in Colossae and presumably encountered St. Paul in Ephesus and was converted. Paul greets his old friend warmly, commends his active propagation of the Gospel and his support of the Christian community.

But Paul is writing to his old friend on a rather delicate matter. While in prison in Rome, Paul has been visited by one Onesimus. Onesimus is none other than Philemon's runaway slave who, by implication, has not only done a runner but may have stolen some of his master's good to help him on the journey. The now penitent slave has come to the Faith and become a most valuable servant of St. Paul, during Paul's first imprisonment.

Paul tells Philemon that this once useless and dishonest slave has, since his conversion, become like a son to him and very useful in the ministry.

There is a joke here because the name 'Onesimus' means useful. So, Paul says that now, in Christ, Onesimus is finally living up to his name. Paul would like to

keep Onesimus BUT recognizes that the correct thing to do is to return him to Philemon and let Philemon decide. Paul is gambling on Philemon's charity here for the punishment for a runaway slave could involve torture or even death.

Paul reminds his old buddy of several things. One, as an apostle, Paul could use his authority to tell Philemon what to do. He doesn't because he wants Philemon to act out of true not enforced charity. Goodness cannot be enforced it must be a voluntary action of the heart.

Second, Paul points out that, although Onesimus is a slave, he has now become a brother in Christ to both Paul and Philemon. This may not change the economic arrangement but it fundamentally alters everything else. Paul enjoins Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he was receiving Paul.

Echoes here of the Lord Jesus... *'inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me.'*

There are more echoes of Christ as Paul makes passing reference to the Good Samaritan. If Onesimus owes anything to Philemon then please charge it to Paul's account. Exactly the words of the Samaritan to the innkeeper who will care for the wounded and now rescued traveller.

A classic bit of St. Paul follows. Whatever debt Paul may pick up from Onesimus he reminds Philemon that HE owes Paul his very life and salvation. So, in conclusion, Paul looks forward to hearing of Onesimus' friendly reception and restoration, perhaps even the grant of his freedom –*'perhaps you will do even more than I ask'*, Paul hints broadly. Oh and by the way, get a bed ready for me when I get out of this house arrest. The implication is that Paul will be round to check up shortly.

In this short epistle Paul reminds us of Apostolic authority. He insists on the grace and providence of God. The useless runaway becomes a key man in the ministry. Any man may turn to Christ and be restored. Paul makes clear that, whatever the worldly distinctions that may remain, in Christ all men are brothers.

We all owe an unpayable debt for our sin but it has been paid by Christ Himself. So we are to be compassionate to our debtors, as the Lord's Prayer is at pains to remind us daily. Paul does not set out on a one man crusade to overturn the economic underpinning of the Roman Empire, slavery, but he does more than hint at the revolution in relationship that is effected in Christ. To become a brother or sister in Christ means that you cannot be, any longer, simply a piece of property.

He underlines just what we owe to those who brought us to Christ. They have given us back our lives. We should thank them and pray for them often. We are to be agents of Christ's compassion and to see all things, as Paul does, within the context of the spread of the Gospel and the building up of the kingdom.

So the useless renegade became, by the grace of God, the most useful disciple. The punch-line is, of course, not in the letter. It cannot be. The name of the redeemed slave Onesimus does appear on one other historic document of the early church. St. Ignatius of Antioch lists him as the successor to St. Timothy as Bishop of Ephesus and later martyred for the faith in Rome under the persecution of Domitian. His feast day in the Eastern Church is February 15th.