



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-September 8th 2019

Readings: Wisdom 9: 13-18, Psalm 89, Philemon 9-10. 12-17,

Luke 14: 25-33

Schoolboys of my generation, if they knew anything of ancient Rome, would be familiar with four major military adventures. Hannibal's extraordinary Transalpine crossing – transport courtesy of terrifying pachyderms. Caesar's Gallic Wars – which formed the regular translation test for Latin O level. Octavian's defeat of Antony & Cleopatra at Actium and the Third Servile War. You will be looking blank now. Third Servile War? You will recall it better if I give you the name of the rebel leader – Spartacus. In 73BC a group of gladiator slaves broke for freedom and, for two years, plundered parts of the Roman Republic. The slaves' revolt was the third such uprising in a century. It only ended when Crassus flung eight legions against it and celebrated the state's victory by crucifying the six thousand captured rebels along the Appian Way.

The slaves had much to rebel about and nothing to lose. Condemned to terrible conditions in the mines or on the land or in the galleys, death was the only escape. The gladiators enjoyed the relative privilege of a swift death at each other's hands to satiate the decadent lust of a mob of baying perverts – the general public.

A slave had no rights. He was a tool. His master could work him to death, beat him, kill him, sexually abuse him – all with no sanction. He was not

a person but an item of property. Master and slave shared no common humanity.

It is true that, in Rome, later developments saw some slaves rise to significant office in a household, for most of human history slavery has depended on a perverse anthropology and a twisted philosophy. Slavery has been a universal feature of Man's sinfulness. The earliest civilisations were often built on the economics of slavery. From the might of Egypt to the terrifying brutality of the Assyrians, from the blood drenched altars of South American paganism to the plantations of the Confederacy and the Caribbean, from the Arab slavers to the Russian Tsars, empires were built and sustained on the fundamental heresy that denied the image of God in Man. Apartheid condemned black people to servitude because of a careful and deliberate misunderstanding of the Biblical curse on Ham in Genesis 9. Hitler philosophised that the Slavs (origin of the word 'slave', were sub-human creatures manipulated by Jews – also inhuman. This allowed a plan to develop to rid the countries where Germany wished to expand of their populations. The destruction of 6 million in the death camps was to be a mere hors d'oeuvre to the planned extermination of 32 million Eastern Europeans.

Today we pride ourselves on being free of slavery, free of a philosophy that denies full humanity to the other person. Sadly, this is not true. We hear constantly of trafficking human beings in the sex trade. Indeed, even where people are supposedly 'free' to be sex workers – the modern euphemism for prostitution and pornography – we know that the correlation between drugs, organised crime and utter degradation tells the real story of its ruthless inhumanity. To libertarians who peddle the permissive lie, I simply ask: 'Would you be happy for your daughter or son to be thus engaged?'

And the slave/non-person/disposable object/property philosophy extends deep into our society. Rejecting the humanity of the unborn child,

reducing her to a 'thing', has enabled Europe to sacrifice her future and to commit a greater holocaust than Hitler.

Today's reading of the epistle touches on this terrible subject. In one of the shortest and most beautiful books of the Bible, St. Paul writes to Philemon, a Christian convert, to alert him to the fact that his runaway slave, Onesimus, is with Paul. Furthermore, Onesimus has become a Christian and a great help to Paul in the mission field.

According to Roman Law, Paul must return him. He is willing to do so BUT.... without overturning the economic or political status quo, he reminds Philemon that his former slave is now his brother in Christ.

Furthermore, Paul is happy to point out that Philemon owes his life, his salvation to Paul. To say that he owes Paul a favour would be an understatement and Paul never knowingly understates. Brotherhood trumps servitude. Heavenly things trump economics. Salvation trumps temporal gain.

Onesimus is not a tool, an object, a non-person, a sub-human, a disposable – he is *imago dei*, made in the image of God with full personhood, a brother in Christ. Anyone who says different is a heretic and a denier of the Gospel. Christianity is utterly incompatible with the materialist doctrine that reduces Man to stuff.

Onesimus goes on to prove Paul's point. The slave of Philemon becomes the Bishop of Ephesus.

Any materialist doctrine or perversion of Christianity that denies the full humanity of the person is at odds with the Gospel of Jesus.