

Rather than look at the gospel reading for today, interesting as it is, I would like to reflect on our second reading, the Letter by Paul to Philemon. It is a letter, which has a message for us.

But before I look at this short letter, let me do something a little different. Let me quote to you a few lines of a poem, which you may be familiar with. The poem is entitled, "The Donkey" by C. K. Chesterton. It is a poem that is often used at Palm Sunday services.

So let me share these lines with you.

With monstrous head and sickening cry,
And ears like errant wings
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things

Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Chesterton's poem about the donkey, says while you may think the donkey is an unattractive and unassuming creature, this animal has had its moment of importance, its moment of glory. And that moment was when a donkey carried Jesus into Jerusalem.

There is a donkey- like -quality about the Letter to Philemon. Looking at this letter, you may think, "Why is this short, private letter between two people important?"

"Why should we read an ancient letter, about a run away slave?"
This letter seems of little importance to us in twenty-first century Australia.

Yet this letter has its secrets. It has its importance.

To understand this letter, we need to know something about the three people mentioned. There is Paul, the writer of the letter; Onesimus, the one that the letter is about, and Philemon, the owner of the slave Onesimus.

Lets begin with Onesimus. This person is a slave, who was most likely kidnapped by slave-traders from the region near the Black Sea. When he was sold into slavery, he lost his identity and was re-named Onesimus, which simply means “useful” in Latin. He had become a commodity, who was bought and sold. For some reason, he has run away from his master, Philemon, taking with him some money or valuables. It appears he sort out Paul, even through Paul was in prison, because he hoped that Paul would help him.

Then there is Philemon. He would have been someone with a certain amount of wealth and importance. He was the owner of Onesimus. Interestingly, Philemon was a member of the small Christian community that exited in the town of Colossae. The Christian church actually met in Philemon’s house.

And how we have Paul. He is in prison in Ephesus, but still very active in ministry, overseeing a number of Christian churches, including the church at Colossae.

The situation that initiated this letter is that Onesimus and Paul had built up a strong and deep friendship. Through the teaching of Paul, Onesimus in time became a Christian himself. It is after this that Onesimus tells Paul he is not a free man, but a run-away slave.

Paul now writes a letter to Philemon asking him to take back Onesimus, not as a slave but as a brother, and to treat him the same way he would treat Paul himself. We now have Paul’s letter to Philemon.

While we have no record of what happened when Onesimus walked through the door of Philemon’s house, it appears that they were reconciled, and Onesimus was granted his freedom.

The importance of this letter lies not only in the reconciliation between these two Christians but also in the teaching that the letter conveys.

Paul in this letter is not demanding Philemon to take back Onesimus rather he is asking Philemon to see Onesimus not as a commodity, as a slave, but as a person. Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus with love and respect, to treat him as a brother.

There is something very appealing about Paul's attitude in this letter. Paul is rejecting the classification of people into groups, and rejecting concerns about status and importance. Instead Paul is encouraging his fellow Christians to see people as individuals. We see this same rejection of labelling people, of putting people into categories, by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, when he wrote:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

And what Paul means by the phrase, “one in Christ” is you are all one in the love, which Christ has for you. The only identity Paul values is the identity of being a sharer in God's love.

One of the glories of this letter is this attitude of giving worth and dignity to others. And making decisions based on the love that you are encouraged to show to each other. It is an attitude, as important in our day, as it was in the time when Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, so long ago.

There is one more quality that makes this letter important.

We have a record by Irenaeus, a leader of the Christian Church in the second century, that the first person to collect the letters of St Paul was a certain Bishop Onesimus. It would appear that Onesimus, the former slave, went on to become a leader himself in the early Christian church. It is understandable that Onesimus would value Paul's letters, for there was a strong bond of affection between the two, and Paul was his teacher in Christ. He owed his freedom to the intervention of Paul.

So without the Letter to Philemon, Onesimus may have stayed a slave, and we may not have had Bishop Onesimus' collection of letters by St Paul. Those letters are some of the foundational documents about the life and teachings of the early Christian church.

For it needs to be remembered that we don't have all of Paul's letter. We know Paul wrote at least one more letter to the Corinthians, which we don't have. And there is a letter to the Laodicea, which is also lost. Bishop Onesimus' collection of letter is then of great importance to the New Testament.

I began my sermon by quoting you some verses from by C K Chesterton poem "The donkey". It is a poem about the donkey - an animal that had its secret, and its time of glory.

This short, unassuming letter by Paul to a man named Philemon is like that poem. It has its glory moments. The glory of this letter is its attitude of respect and dignity, which it conveys. It is a letter, which encourages us to value other people, as individuals, and treat other people, as you would treat your own brother or sister.

The other glory of this letter is its importance in the history of Christianity. For without this letter, we may have lost one of the treasures' of the Christian church, the writings of St Paul to the churches. This is indeed a very important letter.

Let us pray

Lord, help us to learn from this simple letter.

Help us to value other human beings as individuals, and to treat them with dignity and worth.

Help us dear Lord to view, the stranger, the different, and the outcast not as someone to shun or to isolate, but as a fellow sharer with us of God's love.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

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