Sermon on Philemon

I think this is the only time in our three year lectionary cycle that we are afforded the opportunity to read and consider an entire biblical book (of course you’ll be aware that we didn’t actually read the full book, we missed the last three verses, shucks).

Paul’s letter to Philemon, and the church that met at his house, is Paul’s shortest letter, only 335 words in Greek, or to put things into perspective about one-fifth the length of a typical Anglican sermon!

But these 335 words offer us a powerful lesson in the power that is behind all lasting change.

Philemon was a wealthy Christian whose slave Onesimus ran away and went off in search of freedom. On the way he heard Paul’s preaching and joined the church.

He appears to have been gifted in many ways and as a result was quite helpful to Paul in his work; it’s actually the meaning of his name, “helpful.” But once Paul discovers the full extent of his past, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with no protection but this brief letter.

At first blush, the letter appears to be about the institution of slavery and we might rightly wonder at its relevance for us. We live, to say the obvious, in a society that put away this evil institution a long time ago.

But perhaps there’s more than meets the eye in this text and just so perhaps there’s more here that might apply to our particular society.

We live in a culture that seems to celebrate the freedom of the individual to a degree never dreamed of in human history and yet, in the grips of a world-wide recession, in the grip of a huge disparity in wealth between Baby-boomers who benefited from post-war growth and the generations that followed them not benefitting from structural deficits, the question remains: what is a just society? How does change happen that brings about a more just society?

The entire economic foundation of the *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, the justice of Rome, was built on the fiction of increased freedom and security but in actuality was built on radical disparities of wealth and levels of freedom.

At the heart of the Roman social and economic model was the institution of slavery. Lest we have in our minds images from “Roots” that depicted the brutality of chattel slavery in the cotton fields of the southern United States we need to know the situation in the Roman empire was both more pervasive and complex.

It is estimated that 30-40% of the population were slaves. In a country the size of Canada with its 34 million people, imagine 10-14 million of them being slaves.

Slaves were everywhere, but unlike African slavery, it wasn’t based on ethnicity or a belief that one race was inferior to another. Indeed one of the strokes of genius that allowed the Roman Empire to remain secure and to grow was to open citizenship to all people regardless of race or religion.

All that was required was some act that enabled Rome’s grip on power to be strengthened, such as being a collaborater, such as serving Rome overtly by collecting taxes.

Once citizenship was granted it was granted in perpetuity and to all family members. Paul was himself a Roman citizen, a gift bestowed, in his case, by the accident of birth.

Slaves were everywhere, of every colour, they wore clothing that everyone else wore; as such they were largely invisible; they were the people who served you at the market, greeted you at your friend’s house, taught your children and yes, did the difficult work of mining, working in the fields and cleaning the latrines.

There was no thought that things could work any other way. No one had the thought “hey we should get rid of slavery because it’s an oppressive institution.”

Indeed, even Israel, a nation that became so after being freed from slavery had provisions within its constitution, the law, for slaves and slavery. It was simply a fact of the ancient world, as ubiquitous and pervasive as the so-called free market economy is in our world

We also need to add to this equation the attitude of slaves themselves; some like Onesimus yearned for freedom, the normal and typical desire to as much as possible live by our own choices and not the choices forced on us by others.

Others clearly understood that becoming a freed man or woman would make life, not less difficult and more fulfilling, but more difficult and less fulfilling.

Many slaves ran the households of their masters, had access to money, nice clothing and good food.

If one were such a slave, simply using one’s savings to buy freedom didn’t solve the issue of what to do for work and how to make a go of it in a highly stratified culture that gave privilege and favour to those with social connections, something a freed slave would not be able to attain easily, if ever.

In Paul’s letter he appears to side with the institution of slavery when he sends Onesimus back to Philemon his master.

That he doesn’t simply insist that Philemon set Onesimus free has been seen by many pro-slavery factions down through the centuries as tacit support for the institution.

This exposes more than we want of the frailties of communication but also the ability we have to twist communication toward our own ends for any charitable reading of the entire letter will come to the conclusion that Paul wants Philemon to free Onesimus so that he might come back and help Paul.

True this is not a frontal assault on slavery but a truly radical move given the way I’ve just described the institution.

What’s radical is the way Paul presents his case; he doesn’t appeal to law, Roman or Israelite; he doesn’t appeal to personal command or authority, though he hints that he would have the right to, rather he seeks to persuade Philemon of the changed relationship that Christ has affected between him and Onesimus. They may be, in the eyes of the law, Master and slave, but in Christ they are brothers.

You’ll recall in Galatians Paul saying that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, but all are one in Christ.

This was the seed that Paul planted, that Paul demonstrated in his own life, and which began to grow slowly, changing the world, so that by the time Christianity had become the main religion of the Roman Empire slavery was less prevalent and finally abolished.

Of course we know that once European cultures contacted the new world they rationalized a renewed institution of slavery based on the faulty reasoning that the natives of these newly discovered lands were not fully human.

That is a massive moral failing rooted in greed and to the degree that the Church didn’t speak out powerfully and forcefully enough, *its* massive moral failure as well.

Paul seeks to persuade Philemon of his new relationship with Onesimus as the basis for making him free. But this is no mere intellectual persuasion; Paul appeals to his own deep relationship with Philemon. As the host of a house church that met in his home, Paul has no doubt spent quite a bit of time with him.

Deep change, difficult change, change that challenges us to live counter-culturally, which is what Paul is trying to persuade Philemon to do, is only possible through deep friendship, through the commitment of mentoring as I referenced several weeks ago with regard to Jesus’ difficult teachings, such as today’s reading.

Paul demonstrates why it is the Church that still has the power to slowly begin to turn the large ship of society and culture in a direction that is ultimately more reflective of God’s kingdom.

The body of Christ, the Church doesn’t deal with abstractions or general principles, with laws as such. We deal with, live with, seek to persuade and love people, one person, one relationship at a time.

The Church doesn’t participate in revolution for just this reason; it participates in the slow change that comes from the persuasive, wooing love of God that never stops reasoning, committing and being with us.

Revolution produces surface change; persuasion won by love shapes the very millennia that make human civilization.

We may come to church for many reasons but the reason we stay is that it changes our conception of how we relate to God and to others.

This is the core of our off-putting gospel reading. Many of us have great family relationships, many of us do not. If our happiness is based on the way we relate to our blood family we will, in the end, all be disappointed.

Instead we are called to found our lives in Christ, in the new relationships Christ has given us in him; when we do we find we are building on something solid, something even more solid than even the emotional ties of family.

The current saying repeated almost everywhere is, “in the end all you have is family” is true only if by that we mean “brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Family is so important that in God’s wisdom it’s not founded on blood but on Grace.

Onesimus was a brave man, having ventured out in search of freedom he exhibited incredible trust in God and in Paul and in Philemon by going back to him voluntarily.

One of the earliest letters we have written just after the apostolic age, in around 100 c.e. by Ignatius of Antioch, someone who knew some of the apostles, says that Onesimus became a Bishop; Philemon must have freed him, Onesimus must have come back to work with Paul and learned what it took to become a leader in the early church.

This is the stuff of a new commons, not founded by the laws or commands of Lord Caesar but in response to Lord Christ.

When I think about how real, lasting change will come to Abbotsford, to Canada, to our world, still a place wracked by vengeance, pettiness and injustice; when I think about how those of us who come to St. Matthew might have our hearts changed, I don’t put my hope in any political party or in any leader, though to be sure some parties and some leaders are better than others.

I don’t put my hope in any scheme of law, whether civil or church based canon law.

I put my hope in the power of persuasive love, the love that woos us, that calls us and believes that with the Spirit’s help we will make the choices that lead to genuine freedom for those around us and so experience it ourselves. Amen.