

Jer. 18.1-11

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14.25-33

Paul's letter to Philemon is a fascinating little document. It is much closer to our modern concept of a letter than his other epistles – they are more like sermons, perhaps. The letter to Philemon is quite homely, although business-like; and it reveals a lot about Paul's character, and about the first century life in the Church.

There is a dramatic and absorbing story behind the text. We do not quite have all the facts, but we can make some plausible guesses about what has been going on. Let us consider the characters and what we can deduce.

First there is Philemon himself, to whom the letter is addressed. He is designated as Paul's fellow worker, and there is a "church in [his] house." So he was apparently the leader of a small group of Christians; and we can deduce this was probably somewhere near Colossae (in what is now southern Turkey) because the characters described in the letter to the Colossians match the ones in this letter. Philemon was probably married to the lady in the letter called Apphia (though she may have been his sister). Beyond that, we know nothing except that he was wealthy enough to have had a slave, or slaves. I will come to the morality of Christians owning slaves in a moment.

The slave is of course Onesimus, and we need to do a little more intelligent guesswork about him. We know he is a slave, because Paul says so; and his name means "useful" – probably a slightly demeaning title that he was given. He may have been a slave from birth.

But he has run away from Philemon – and therefore become "not useful". He was apparently visiting Paul rather than in prison; this must be the case, since Paul was apparently in a position to send him back to Philemon.

And, clearly, Onesimus had by this time become a Christian – probably through meeting Paul and his companions. There is a hint that he has been baptised, and that Paul stood as his godparent. (Imagine having Paul as *your* godfather; there would not be much scope for religious laxity or backsliding.)

Finally, we can deduce, with reasonable certainty, that Onesimus was a young man, maybe a teenager, because there is a reference in an early Church letter to "Onesimus", and this letter is dated about 110 AD – around 50 years after the letter to Philemon was written. And Onesimus had by then become a bishop! So I think he was probably about 15 when he met Paul, and he lived to be at least 65.

What does the letter tell us about Paul?

He was a little devious. He did not write privately to Philemon; he wrote to the whole Church – so everyone could read it, and see what Paul was asking. This must have added to the pressure on Philemon.

Secondly, he started the letter by flattering Philemon, telling him what a wonderful Christian brother he was – a great example to all.

And then he said, in effect, “Of course, as an apostle I could *order* you to take him back as a Christian brother...but I’m sure you will make the right decision about forgiveness and reconciliation”. There is no question of moral blackmail.

And finally Paul hinted that reconciliation with Onesimus is not enough. He suggested, to my mind quite strongly, that Onesimus should in fact be set free from slavery. And of course, if we believe that Onesimus did eventually become a bishop, this is what must have happened. Philemon was certainly invited to start the legal process of what is called manumission: that is, formal judicial release from slavery.

Some might say that Paul was driving a coach and horses through the established arrangements for slavery within the Roman Empire and the prevailing views of the first century AD. But when the western world abolished slavery in nineteenth century, the interpretation of the letter to Philemon was seized by both sides in the debate. There were those who argued that, because in this letter Paul respected the prevailing legal rights of slave owners like Philemon, slavery should continue.

But others, the anti-slavery lobby, emphasised the words: “...you may have him back forever, no longer as a slave...but a beloved brother.” You could say that both sides have a point. My own view is that Paul – who was already in prison and presumably closely watched – went as far as he possibly could, given the prevailing Roman law, to promote emancipation.

I want now to use the letter to Philemon to illustrate how we, as Christians, make ethical moral judgements – that is, how we determine the right course of action when faced with difficult decisions. The rights and wrongs of slavery once represented a moral dilemma, but it is now of course universally condemned; but it can be used to illustrate the point.

There are three, or possibly four, aspects to any ethical debate, under the headings: Scripture, Tradition, Reason; and Experience.

Scripture, the Holy Bible, is marked off from other writings because it has special status and authority within the Christian community. It is therefore an obvious source of moral authority – though it must of course be understood in its own context. Moreover, if we seek to use scripture we must remember not only the context, but also how these texts, written in a different age, can speak to our lives in the 21st century. Although some Christians believe scripture is the *only* true source of moral authority, most recognise that you have to be careful and use other sources of wisdom.

In the context of Philemon, slavery in the first century AD was perceived then as entirely natural, whether you were Christian or Pagan; it was possibly on a par with, for example, car ownership today. Paul was treading carefully around an established institution.

Tradition includes the Christian Church's time-honoured practices: a shared understanding of who we are, what we exist for and how we should live our lives. Tradition is expressed, for example, in worship and prayer; and in the Eucharist. This is why we are here today, this Sunday morning. Paul hinted strongly about one prevailing tradition in his letter to Philemon when he emphasised that Onesimus was now Philemon's beloved brother. Bonds of Christian affiliation are much stronger than social status. While tradition is not static, it does provide a store of collective experience and memory that links Christians across time and space.

Reason is essential in moral decision making. Human powers of thought and understanding – wisdom if you like – give us an insight into what is good and right. It does not take a lot to realise that human trafficking and all the evils of modern slavery associated with it are manifestly wrong. But other decisions – for example, whether stem cell research is justified – are a bit trickier, and it is quite possible for Christians to take either side of the argument. Sound, expert reasoning may be crucial here.

And finally, although it links to both tradition and reason, it is hard to imagine any kind of moral deliberation that does not make use of our own experience, and that of others¹. Paul must have asked Onesimus about his experiences as a slave. And so it is common for Christians to be at the forefront of campaigns to help those who are oppressed or marginalised: the homeless and those who are refugees, for example.

I commend to you the letter of Philemon. Do have another read of it, and ponder all the dilemmas that lie behind it. Remember that it is a fragment, a tiny part of the canon of scripture, but still invaluable in the way it can help to guide us through a moral maze.

Amen.

¹ The preceding paragraphs owe much to Messer, *Christian Ethics*, pp.5-8.