

## SERMON 4 SEPTEMBER 2016

O Lord, let me try to be right;  
Or at the very least, let me try to be true.  
In the name of Christ. Amen

This is my last summer sermon to be preached this year from the Lectern, and not the pulpit, so as you can see, I have made an effort to dress appropriately.

However, I have not been quite so casual about the sermon, which has been carefully planned, considered and written for your pleasure.

Quite unlike the priest who told his congregation 'I have not had time to prepare anything this week, so I am relying entirely on God to provide the sermon. However, I promise you next week will be better'.

Today we hear the Epistle of Paul to Philemon and the story of Onesimus. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to pronounce some Bible names? Does one say Philemon, Philemon, Philemon, or Qnesimus, One-simus, One-simus, Onesimos on-ay'-sim-os? Don't look at me, I have no idea. Whatever it is, please excuse my ignorance and let's not worry about it.

So, Philemon was a rich resident of Colossus, and had been converted to Christianity by Paul when he visited Colossus. Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, and obviously being bored with this, decided to steal some money from his master and run away.

Somehow he ended up in Rome, where he came across Paul on his first visit to Rome, where Paul had been arrested by the authorities, but this was more a case of house arrest, since he could receive visitors and see people. Paul points out in the beginning of his letter that he considers himself to be a prisoner, not of the Romans, but on behalf of Christ Jesus, by virtue of his faith.

Paul then proceeded to convert Onesimus also to Christianity. Now Paul could not in good conscience keep Philemon with him, despite all the good services that he was rendering to Paul, because of his love for Philemon and the status of Onesimus, which was after all runaway slave and thief.

The Epistle of Philemon is a plea by Paul to Philemon to accept Onesimus, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother because he is now also a follower of Christ.

Paul says that he could order Philemon to accept Onesimus, because of his relationship to Philemon, because of what he owes to Paul.

Paul writes that he is an old man and a prisoner of Christ Jesus; what he means is that he is a senior person in the Church of Christ, an ambassador for Christ, and he could demand obedience. Instead he relies on the love that Paul has for Philemon, and vice versa, and the love that Paul now bears for Onesimus, whose father Paul has become during this time, at least spiritually speaking.

There is also a play on words here, because Onesimus means profitable or useful. Paul says: 'Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me'. The apostle accordingly begs Philemon to give Onesimus the same reception as he would rejoice to give to Paul himself. The past history of Onesimus had been such as to belie the meaning of his name. He had not been "profitable" - far from it. But already his consistent conduct in Rome and his willing service to Paul there have changed all that; he has been profitable to Paul, and he will be profitable to Philemon too.

But because Onesimus had stolen money from Philemon, there is a debt still to be paid. If Philemon feels he is still owed anything, Paul offers to be responsible for any outstanding amount. To demonstrate his sincerity, Paul states that he is writing this with his own hand. Paul sometimes puts in his Letters that he was writing this with his own hand, which suggests that most of his letters were in fact not written by him, but only dictated and written by someone else. So when he says he is writing it, we know this is serious.

Paul here is effectively writing a blank cheque. 'If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it'. Paul must be very confident of the reaction of Philemon to his letter to be able to underwrite an unknown amount. Philemon can rely on Paul to pay whatever he demands. Had Philemon not been a Christian, and had Paul not written this Epistle, Onesimus might well have been afraid to return to Colossus. In the Roman empire slaves were constantly crucified for much smaller offenses than those of which he had been guilty. A thief and a runaway slave had nothing but torture or death to expect.

But the whole dynamic has changed. Onesimus is now a Christian, and as such a brother of Paul and of Philemon. For the love of Christ, Philemon will do as Paul requests and accept Onesimus

The master who has been defrauded now owns allegiance to Jesus. The letter, which is delivered to him by his slave, is written by his partner and friend Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ. The slave too is now a brother in Christ, beloved by Paul: surely he will be beloved by Philemon also. Paul is so sure of Philemon that he can state : ' I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ... Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.'

The man whom the Colossians had only known hitherto, if they knew him all, as a worthless runaway slave, is thus commended to them, as no more a slave but a brother, no more dishonest and faithless but trustworthy; no more an object of contempt but of love (Lightfoot's Commentary on Col, 235).

Can we tie that message in with today's Gospel passage? The Bible readings for the day are carefully chosen by very learned and intelligent people to fit together and reflect a common message. Sometimes, however, it does take a bit of effort to see the thread that binds it all together.

Well, I don't think Jesus is saying here that in order to become his disciples we must give up all our slaves. He does say we must give up all our possessions, but is that what He means? Earlier in this passage Jesus tells the crowds : 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple'. Strong stuff indeed.

The God we worship is a God of love, so He cannot really be saying we have to hate our closest and dearest to follow Him.

To put this into perspective, we need to look at the context. Jesus is being followed by large crowds, expecting Him to do miracles and establish His Kingdom on earth. But they are expecting a secular and military state, where the disliked and cruel Roman overlords will be crushed and swept out of Judea and Galilee.

However, Jesus has another agenda, to re-establish the lines of communication between man and God, and to free us from the burden of sin and death; to save us and bring us back to God. To do so requires that we commit ourselves to God, that we put God first in our lives, that we consider carefully the cost of following Christ, just as a builder calculates if he has enough to construct a tower, or a king estimates if he can win a war with his smaller army against a stronger opponent.

Jesus is more interested in the quality of our discipleship, not the number of followers. It's not a matter of how many bums on pews, or to put it in a less vulgar manner, how many people are in Church, but rather what are they doing for Christ outside Church.

As disciples, we must subordinate all earthly relationships to loyalty to Christ. Hate does not mean to bear ill will, but to choose Christ over all others. We must put Christ first, and give up all selfish interest for His sake.

But the way we react with others is how we demonstrate our relationship with God. It is in showing love to those around us that we show our love for God.

I'll finish this with a simple example. There is an old Meredith Willson musical, called "The Music Man." In the musical, there was a scene where Professor Harold Hill asks the Librarian Marian Paroo to meet him at the foot bridge where couples go to make out.

Although she wanted to, Marian was shy and afraid and said "No, maybe tomorrow." Harold Hill responded by saying, "Oh my dear Marian, if you gather up enough tomorrows, all you'll have is a bunch of empty yesterdays."

Were you listening? If you gather up enough tomorrows, all you'll have is a bunch of empty yesterdays.

There's a line to meditate. So, don't be shy to tell your family every day that you love them. Keep in touch with your friends. Write or telephone or email the ones you haven't spoken to for a while. Because if you wait until tomorrow, all you will have is a bunch of empty yesterdays! And you will have missed an opportunity to love your neighbour and your God.

*In Jesus' name*

*Amen*