

READING

Philemon

SERMON

Better Than a Slave...a Dear Brother (Philemon)

A robot stands in the dock accused of murder, but the case brought against the robot is that he should be turned off and dismantled as he has killed someone and therefore as a machine should be destroyed. The defence argues that as a machine the robot cannot commit murder, it cannot be held culpable for the offence with which it is charged and so the trial is a nonsense. If the trial continues then the robot is being treated as a sentient being, a being with thoughts, with feelings with all the faculties to live like you or I, and as there is no death penalty in the area where this trial is taking place, then the robot cannot be 'turned off' and dismantled.

Of course that is the plot of a Science Fiction novel asking the question, when is a sentient being not a sentient being? But is not this a million years away from Philemon, or is it?

Apparently in England trade in slaves was made illegal in 1102, and the last form of overt enforced servitude had disappeared in Britain by the beginning of the seventeenth century. However, by the eighteenth century, black slaves began to be brought into London and Edinburgh as personal servants. They were not bought or sold, and their legal status was unclear until 1772, when the case of a runaway slave named James Somerset forced a legal decision. The owner, Charles Stuart, had attempted to abduct him and send him to Jamaica to work on the sugar plantations.

While in London, Somerset had been baptised and his godparents issued a writ of *habeas corpus*. As a result Lord Chief Justice William Murray, Lord Mansfield, of the Court of King's Bench had to judge whether the abduction was legal or not under English Common Law as there was no legislation for slavery in England. In his judgement of 22 June 1772 he declared:

"Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from a decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged."

It was thus declared that the condition of slavery did not exist under English law. This judgement emancipated the 10 to 14 thousand slaves in England and also laid down that slavery contracted in other jurisdictions (such as the American colonies) could not be enforced in England.

Sadly this case did not lead to a stopping of the slave trade – it just meant that slaves were not brought to Britain by their owners – if it is even applicable to describe a relationship between two people where one is called the owner of the other.

The letter of Paul to Philemon that Gerda read to us is about three people, one of whom is a slave and another is the master of the slave. We have

- Paul, the author
- Philemon, the rich person living in Colossae
- Onesimus, a runaway slave who is returning to Colossae

Paul

Paul in this letter makes a great play on the fact that he is a prisoner. Verse 1 we read

“Paul, a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow-worker,” (Philemon 1:1 NIV)

And then in verses 9 and 10

“yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul— an old man and now also a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was *in chains*.” (Philemon 1:9-10 NIV)

And again in verse 13

“I would have liked to keep him, Onesimus, with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am *in chains* for the gospel.” (Philemon 1:13 NIV)

And finally in the antepenultimate verse of the letter, verse 23

“Epaphras, my *fellow-prisoner* in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings.”
(Philemon 1:23 NIV)

Is Paul trying to contrast and compare his plight with that of the slave Onesimus, whom he really wants to keep with him, to that of Onesimus himself who is a prisoner as a slave? In fact Paul had more rights as a prisoner who was a Roman citizen than did a slave within the Roman Empire.

Paul it seems is also responsible for the conversion of Philemon as we read in verse 19

“I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.” (Philemon 1:19 NIV)

Philemon owing his life to Paul is taken to mean that this is his spiritual life rather than his physical life. Paul was not one to cling onto physical life, but he was concerned about spiritual life. Hopefully we too have the same balance as Paul in this matter?

Philemon

Then we move onto Philemon. It seems as if Philemon is a well-to-do man who lives in Colossae. Colossae is not mentioned in Philemon and Philemon is not mentioned in Colossians. However Archippus, who is mentioned in verse 2 of Philemon is also mentioned in Colossians 4:17

“Tell Archippus: “See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.”” (Colossians 4:17 NIV)

One commentator I read even put forward the theory that Philemon was married out Apphia whom Paul calls, **our sister** (Philemon 1:2) and that Archippus, **the fellow soldier** (Philemon 1:2) was their son. This is speculation from silence and so cannot be taken as undeniable truth, but it makes a nice family group.

Philemon also has an open house where a church meets, so not too small a house. And he also has at least one slave, but could have owned more, we do not know.

Philemon is also called by Paul:

- **A Man of Faith** (verse 5). We are not told why Paul should be thanking God for the faith in the Lord Jesus, but somehow it was there and evident and we do no good to speculate because that would go further than the text allows. But could that be said of us. Are we, are you, am I a person of faith? Is our, your, my faith evident to others around me?
- **A Man of Love** (verse 5-7) – he has a love for all the saints and also for Paul and I feel that his love is active and for all those at church and news of his loving acts have reached Paul. His love refreshes people.

I love the King James Version for verse 7

“For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.” (Philemon 1:7 KJV)

As we go through life there are those we meet who drain us, and there are those who refresh us, who invigorate us. Some people drain us emotionally and we have to be in top form to meet them. They just wear you down and wear you out when you are with them and you feel like a wrung out rag after spending time with them.

However there are others who give us energy. When we are feeling down, they refresh us, they perk us up. When you have visited them you walk out as if you are on a cushion of air. I can remember two ladies that I knew, the first you would ask how she was and she would then tell you how she should not have died at aged sixteen and then proceeded to tell you all of her ailments, illnesses and operations for the next fifty plus years of her life. She would then move on to moan about other people and usually ended up by having a moan at me for something or other. I use to leave her house feeling totally drained.

Whenever I visited her, I would then go to see someone else, who had the knack of making me feel refreshed. She was positive and even if she said something negative, it was still positive.

What do we, what do I do to people? Drain or Refresh?

- **A Man of Mission** – Paul encourages Philemon to be active in sharing the great things he has in Christ. Verse 6

“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (Philemon 1:6 NIV)

They say that you learn best when you give it away to others. Paul seems to be encouraging Philemon to share his faith with others, from his knowledge of Jesus. It is no good just gaining knowledge if we then just keep it. We are to deepen our relationship and then tell others.

However if you look at the New Living Translation we have

“You are generous because of your faith. And I am praying that you will really put your generosity to work, for in so doing you will come to an understanding of all the good things we can do for Christ.” (Philemon 1:6 NLT)

Something that is very different to what is said on the New International Version.

“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (Philemon 1:6 NIV)

All the commentators say that this is a very difficult verse to translate and it is ambiguous, so we cannot build a doctrine on it, but we are called upon to be generous with our possession towards others and also to be generous at telling others about God and what Jesus has done for us. So hopefully we do.

- **A Man of Hospitality** – he was also a man of hospitality. Verse 22

“And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.” (Philemon 1:22 NIV)

May we all follow this lead from Philemon and other and be ready your open our homes to others. Philemon had the church in his home. He was asked by Paul to put him up. Would people ask that of us or do they know we would decline – it being too much bother?

Onesimus

So we have looked at Paul, looked at Philemon, now let us look at the other main character in the letter, that of Onesimus. He was a slave of Philemon's and seems to have been useless, even though his name means useful. Verse 10

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, which means useful, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was *useless* to you, but now he has become *useful* both to you and to me.” (Philemon 1:10-11 NIV)

Onesimus was a slave, a useless one it seems and possibly a thief as we read in verse 18

“If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.” (Philemon 1:18 NIV)

Maybe when he ran away he took money to make his escape easier and some think that he travelled from Colossae to Rome so as to go to the big city and get lost in the crowd. But he went to Paul, or met Paul or maybe travelled to Rome to be with Paul and was converted there and so was returning to pay his debts to Philemon. Paul talks about paying the debt because apparently if you harboured a runaway slave you were liable for a daily rate, payable to the slave owner for the loss of work.

But there is a big difference for Onesimus as he returns. Verse 15

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” (Philemon 1:15-16 NIV)

... **no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother** (Philemon 1:16). What many call the heart of this letter, the shortest letter from Paul in the New Testament. But nowhere in the letter does Paul condemn slavery, nowhere in the New Testament does Paul condemn slavery. In fact he seems to accept it and tells slaves to be loyal to their owners and no revolt.

There had been revolts by slaves, perhaps the most famous for us being in the 70s BC led by Spartacus. The Roman Empire was built on slavery and slaves performed all sorts of duties, some of which required intelligence and culture. Apparently the tasks performed by slaves included not only field labourer and household people, but architects, sculptors, painters, poets, musicians, librarians and doctors. The slave population of the Roman Empire was enormous and had changed the economic base of the Empire.

This is not to justify slavery, the owning of one person by another.

- It could have been that Paul was so entrenched in it that he never saw it for what it was.
- It could have been that Paul knew that to call an uprising of the slaves to be free would have totally crushed Christianity in its infancy.

So Paul does something different he says that Philemon is to treat Onesimus **no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother**. And how can a dear brother or sister in Christ then be a slave. We are all free in Christ and there is no difference between us, so why did not Paul say this to Philemon and why did they not see it for themselves. Why did it take another seventeen hundred years for the Abolition Of The Slave Trading Act to go through Parliament and stop the slave trade? We still have to wait a further twenty years for the abolition of slavery? Why is it that for many years, things like slavery, like apartheid were justified by many on Biblical grounds? It is because we read the Bible through our cultural eyes, whether we want to or not.

During the Reformation, so much was seen by Luther and Calvin, but they did not become Baptists, they still practiced infant christening. Maybe the early church was blind to slavery and the wrongness in it?

So what does this mean to us today?

- Take care when condemning the past – it may have been due to their culture blinding them. We too may be condemned by future generations for things we do now. Channel 4 run these 100 best or worse programmes and they had the worse comedies of most non-PC comedies and there were some that we all laughed at, at the time, because we were blind to the fact that one or more groups were being prejudiced against at the time.
- We need to be constantly vigilant against modern day forms of slavery. At present there is an exhibition in St Paul's Cathedral called 'Slave Britain' which is an exhibition of art of modern day slaves like the picture of the Birmingham street with the caption that

A 15-year-old Lithuanian girl was trafficked in a rented house to the street where she was made to have sex with at least five clients a day.

Or it can be

Foreign workers lured here with the promise of employment in their chosen professions, only to find themselves with no way out. Their passports are taken, they are threatened with retaliation against themselves or their families, and have to do as they're told

Let us constantly be on the lookout for slavery in any form, and hopefully we will not be culturally blind to it.