

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time  
(Year C)  
4<sup>th</sup> September 2022

The Book of Philemon is one of the shortest books in the Bible at about 300 words. On the face of it, it is just a personal letter from St Paul to a friend. You might almost ask why it is there in the New Testament at all. But it pays a closer look.

Paul writes to Philemon, a friend of his, a man who hosts a gathering of the church in his own home, a man who owes his own conversion to St Paul (either directly or indirectly). St Paul respects him, and has heard that 'the hearts of the saints have been refreshed' through him. But St Paul is not writing to him to flatter him, he is writing to make a very serious request. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Onesimus had been his slave, but has run away. Onesimus then met St Paul, and through St Paul he, too, has become a Christian. So here an interesting situation has been set up. Paul is responsible for the conversion of Philemon, and of his slave Onesimus. But Onesimus has run away from his master. So, what happens now? That is why this letter is important to us, because St Paul uses it to tell us something truly radical and revolutionary.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a complex thing. Some slaves were engaged in heavy physical labour; but others were well-educated, often acting as tutors to their masters' children, or running their businesses for them. Some slaves were able to earn their own money, even enough to buy their own freedom. But in the religious sphere, there was a stark distinction. Slaves in the Roman Empire had few legal protections, and were in effect not counted as real people at all. They were certainly not welcome to worship with the free men and women, so if they wanted to worship at all, they had to find a slaves' place of worship. But that was not the way for the little Christian communities. One of the most outraged criticisms levelled at them was that they were undermining the whole social fabric by allowing slaves and free to worship together. So when St Paul writes to Philemon, begging him to welcome back his runaway slave, he is asking something that is by the standards of the day outrageous. For St Paul this is very clear – he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but getting his slave back is as nothing compared to having a new brother. St Paul is not afraid to shake up the existing social order, and to slip a slave into the little church community that meets at Philemon's house, to worship as an equal with the people he used to serve.

But that is not enough for St Paul. He is always keen to make the most of an opportunity to shake people up. He says to Philemon 'welcome him as you would me'. So, Paul is saying to him, don't welcome him as if he were a runaway slave, welcome him as if he were the person whose preaching had saved you – the person whose love for the Lord had turned your life on its head. That really is quite a claim. Not only are you to rock the order of the pagan world by welcoming a slave to worship with you in your house, but you are to welcome him with as much joy and enthusiasm as if he had been the person whose words had saved you. When the Book of Wisdom says 'a perishable body presses down the soul and a tent of clay weighs down the teeming mind' this is just so much what it means. Our prejudices, our smallness of imagination, our keenness to uphold the social order, the way that things have always been done, these all act as stops that

prevent the real radicalism of the Gospel taking root. St Paul is writing to Philemon to help him break out of that smallness of imagination, that temptation to do what everyone else is doing, and to do what we have always done. It seems obvious to us that slaves and free people are equal before the Lord – in fact, of course, it seems obvious to us that slavery is an iniquitous and inhuman institution. As St Gregory of Nyssa will say in the Fourth Century, at what price might one expect to buy the image of God? We are all made in God's image, bearing his likeness, so how could any one person claim to buy the image of God in another? Two thousand years ago this was too radical even for St Paul, but without a doubt he intends to disrupt and undermine a way of ordering society that allows any distinction to be made between slave and free.

The little letter to Philemon is, then, much more than a friendly letter recommending one person to another. It is a bomb placed under the accepted way of things, encouraging people to believe that something better is possible. The Gospel opens up for us new possibilities. It did so then, and it does so now. We must not let the perishable body press down the soul. We must believe that the way the world works can be made better, more human, more in tune with God's dream for us. We do not need to settle for the way things have always been done. We must expect a serious reading of the Gospel to disrupt the widely accepted way of doing things. This will always be the way, until the sun sets for the last time and the created world draws to its close. Where the Gospel is alive and active, there is always something challenging and disruptive about it, and that is why this little letter found its way into the scriptures.