**FOUR SHORT EPISTLES**

**Onesimus-the converted slave**

**Philemon 1 Timothy 6: 1-2**

1. Introduction.

Currently, the Black Lives Matter movement has raised, quite rightly, the issue, profile and ramifications of something so cruel, dehumanizing and unjust as slavery. We may disagree with some of its remedies, but it is apt that, today, we shall be exploring the Christian approach to slavery in the story of a converted slave, Onesimus, owned by Philemon. Slavery is a glaring example of Man’s inhumanity to Man, when more power enables the exploitation for gain of the more weak, whether in terms of difference in strength of society, of culture or of race. In the Ancient World slavery had underpinned civilized societies from time immemorial. Some reckon that in the 5th century BC one third of Athens’ population was enslaved. Only in Judaism was there any limit in that every seven years or at Jubilee all slaves could claim their freedom. To own another human being can so easily bring out the worst in mankind-be it thoughtless unkindness, overwork or, as in the West Indies, the fear of a slave revolt as well. What should be the Christian approach in the first century AD be? In Philemon we see not a direct assault on slavery but an indirect one, where a believing owner and house slave were brothers in Christ. They shared the same status as part of the same family. They served the same Master.

1. Paul in 1 Timothy 6: 2 realized believing slaves might be tempted “to show less respect for their masters, because they were brothers. Instead they are to serve them even better, because” ….(their masters were) “believers and dear to them.” Stereotypical house slaves in Greek comedies were portrayed as being cheeky or ‘fresh’! He is clear in 1 Timothy: 6: 1 that slavery is a “yoke” 1 Timothy. 6: 1. Yet in Col. 3: 11 he states “Here (in a Christian community) there is no Greek or Jew,……… barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all in all.” This implied contradiction would slowly-too slowly many would say- weaken slavery’s foundation to the point of collapse.
2. Background.

**Paul** wrote this letter from prison at either Ephesus or Rome –perhaps in 55 AD or 61 AD. Obviously, the recipient-Philemon was a close personal friend, so the tone was intimate and frank using the second person singular-a distinction lost in English where ‘Thee’ and ‘Thou’ are no longer followed! He wrote in v 4 “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers” and twice noted his love “for all the saints (Christians)” which gave him “great joy and encouragement.” v 5 & v 7

**Philemon** was well off, lived with his family (Appia and Archippius were probably his wife and son respectively) in or near Colossae and had been converted by Paul, perhaps, in Ephesus v 19. He ran a house church, which was a thriving centre of worship, teaching and evangelism. He helped local Christians in distress v 7 refreshing “the hearts of the saints”.

**Onesimus** was one of his house slaves, the only slave group mentioned in the Epistles. His names meant ‘Useful’ hence the pun in v 11 about being unprofitable in. He must have run off, probably, with money stolen from Philemon and disappeared, as most runaway slaves were wont to do, into the anonymity of a large city like Rome or Ephesus. He, too, was converted by Paul, whom he helped, enormously, as a sort of PA in prison. There was a great bond of affection between them. Paul loved him as a “son” v 10-said he was his “very heart” and in v 16 explained he was “very dear to me”. Crucially, he wanted to help regularize Onesimus’ position.

Paul’s imprisonment was more like a house arrest, so that a number of believers like Epaphras in v23“ a fellow prisoner of Christ Jesus” or in v24 Luke, Mark or Demas “fellow workers” helped him as PAs, arranging meetings, running errands and giving domestic comfort, meals and fellowship.

1. The substance of the letter was very serious, even if the tone was friendly and intimate. Runaway slaves, even if domestic ones (as opposed to field hands), faced horrific punishments if caught. Paul, as a believer, felt he had to come clean about Onesimus and return him to Philemon, another believer. His departure would be a wrench for Paul vv 12-13 or possibly for both of them. He urged Philemon to have him back v 16 “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother”. There is a hint that Philemon might free him, for Paul knows v21 “he will do even more than I ask.” Many owners in their wills did free slaves, who had served them well. There was another option that Onesimus could return to Paul v 13 “I would have liked to keep him with me, so that he could take your place in helping me, while I am in chains for the gospel.” v 13. Lastly, Paul offers in v 19, writing in his own hand, as a sort of gentleman’s agreement, to repay v 18 “if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything ”.
2. It was ‘a big ask’ for Philemon to accept Paul’s request to take back a runaway slave without punishment. Clearly, Paul gives much prayer support to Philemon and thanks the Lord for all Philemon’s service v.4. It is a request in v 9 made “on the basis of love” for Philemon and Onesimus, even though, rather daringly, he suggests he could get heavy and say v 8 “in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do”! It’s wonderful that Paul does not v 14 “want to do anything without Philemon’s consent” which should “be spontaneous and not forced.” He suggests that there was a silver lining to the cloud caused by Onesimus’ running away. In v 15 “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good… as a dear brother”. He hopes, indeed, that Onesimus will be welcomed back v 17, as if he was Paul himself v 16 “even dearer to you both as a man and a brother in the Lord.” Moreover, Paul was hoping to come and stay later v. 22 “Prepare a guest room for me..”. Lastly, it was customary, then, to expect a gift to be reciprocated, which may seem strange to us! Paul’s gift to Philemon had been to point him to the Lord Jesus v 19 “you owe me your very self”, so Philemon’s taking back of Onesimus would repay Paul-with what in v 20 he calls “ some benefit from you in the Lord.”
3. How does this help us?

In general, we should treat those who serve us not with condescension or rudeness (see notices at supermarket checkouts!) but with respect and kindness, for after all we are servants even slaves of the Lord, who loves us. There is **the** **challenge from Paul** who risks his friendship with Philemon to make the difficult request in love to help Onesimus. Though sometimes Paul seems bossy, his tender side shows here. This is love taking a real risk!

There is **the** **challenge from Philemon**, the loving and generous Christian leader, to in v 6 “be active in sharing the faith” and to learn “a full understanding of every good thing in Christ”, so that his house church might be an example of the new society in Christ founded on forgiveness and acceptance of a repentant believing slave-what a task for and tribute to a loving fellowship! **The** **challenge from Onesimus** is that he is being transformed by the Lord Jesus into a dear brother and helper to Paul, one prepared in Christ’s strength to return to his former owner whatever the consequences-he is brave indeed!

May we be able in Christ’s strength rise to any of these challenges that speaks clearly to us individually or collectively.