

23rd Sunday of OT 2019
Fr Jonathan Jong

Wisdom 9.13-18

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Luke 14.25-33

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

His name means *useful*, which must have been ironic for a slave. People disagree about how Onesimus ended up incarcerated with St Paul: most commentators have thought that he ran away from slavery to prison, but it seems to me more likely that he was on loan to the apostle. On loan: like a library book or like capital. In any case, he has been with Paul for a little while, and it is time for him to return. So, Paul sends him back with this letter: in it, a request, the nature of which has been contentious for centuries.

Not debated very hotly, mind you. For most of the history of the Church, the epistle to Philemon was ignored as unimportant. Nobody cared about the fate

of a single slave in a world chock full of anonymous indentured servitude. And when the letter wasn't marginalised, it was taken as support for the socio-political status quo, whatever that might be. St Paul returned a slave to his master, and did not ever overtly command the master to release the slave. And so it is, so said centuries of Christian teaching from John Chrysostom to John Calvin, that the Church should not try to intervene in such matters: the gospel is not in the business of disrupting the social order.

Which just goes to show that the Church has always been plagued by moral cowardice, which at least makes her luminaries that much more relatable. That the Church, for most of her history—which is also a history of complicity with and profit from slavery—could not see even the possibility of abolition in St Paul's request should not be surprising to us who cannot really believe that Jesus means what he says here in Luke's gospel.

If any one—

does not hate their own father and mother
does not hate their brothers and sisters

does not hate their spouse and kids,
does not hate their own life
does not renounce all of it
—then they cannot be my disciple.

He couldn't possibly mean that: we won't let ourselves believe that he does, and we find all sorts of ways to wriggle out of the implication that, when it comes down to it, we are not his disciples after all, not yet, no more than slavery has been abolished. There are over forty million people enslaved today, according to the best estimates, which are not very good because it turns out that it is difficult to count people who are being clandestinely trafficked. All the same, there can be little doubt that slavery persists in the supply chains that fill our bellies and clothe our backs and satiate our cravings to consume. In this country, we congratulate ourselves for abolishing slavery in 1833, but of course British banks continued to profit from mortgage-backed securities while it was *people* being mortgaged. Even now, many things we eat and drink and wear are the spoils of slavery: tea and sugar and chocolate and cotton and maybe even your engagement

ring, intended to symbolise love, of all things, the tragic irony.

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St Paul's letter to Philemon *is* ambiguous, even though he calls for Onesimus to be received "no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother". It is true that St Paul does not ever say that slavery is wrong: nor does he say that Onesimus should be freed. The Bible also never says that we should reduce our carbon footprints; never says that we should make consumer choices that enhance the welfare of workers; never says that we should use the levers of democracy for anything, not least because it says nothing about democracy at all.

And who can discern what the Lord wills? The reasoning of mortals is worthless, and our designs are likely to fail.

Quite, but here's the rub: the Lord does will stuff, does make moral demands of us, and therefore the discerning needs to be done if we are to keep walking

straight. To be sure, Christians disagree about moral issues all the time, and always will. As you know well, the occupants of this pulpit are inclined to inveigh against varieties of exploitation and exclusion and oppression. There are other places in town for those who prefer more prurience in preaching. It is foolish to pretend that our disagreements are easy to adjudicate. But the difficulty of moral discernment is no excuse for complacency. The *reasoning of mortals* is not worthless because it is fallible: it is worthless when its fallibility leads to moral torpor. It is cynical casuistry that we have to watch out for, not earnest attempts to count the cost, to figure out what it means for the gospel to demand that we renounce *all*, which is not on its face an ambiguous word, not a word easily relativised.

Perhaps St Paul's ambiguity allows Philemon to make up his own mind about what to do with Onesimus, about whether slavery is part of the "all" that the gospel demands that he renounce. I am too pessimistic about human nature—or at least too impatient—to want to leave decisions about human trafficking up to powerful individuals, but I can see the wisdom of St Paul appealing to *love* rather than to law: freely

chosen goodness is—I grudgingly admit—better, more sustainable than goodness compelled.

Maybe there is something virtuous about the powerlessness of the pulpit, at least for those of us who are as impatient and pessimistic as I am, and therefore perversely tempted toward totalitarianism as a solution against bigotry and injustice. This too is a tragic irony. From here, preachers can only persuade, can only appeal to you as well as to ourselves for love's sake that we receive as brothers and sisters the anonymous others who are daily being crucified for our comfort and convenience, those who break their backs to build our towers and furnish them with all manner of stuff delivered by the next day, not to mention those who die for us or against us on battlefields we cannot even place on maps. Receive them, not as slaves or soldiers, but as beloveds.

Or, try, anyway. I once heard the poet Pádraig Ó Tuama say that he loves the verb *try* or better yet the verb *essay*, with its imaginative, experimental connotations: it is how he sees the Christian life. Try: to discern the cost of discipleship, the path we are

called to tread. But *really* try, and not settle for effortless gestures of dubious moral value, behavioural equivalents of empty platitudes done more to assuage our guilt than to make a difference in the world. Try, because we have nothing to lose neither to fear from failure, we whose moral debts have been forgiven us, now and forever, we who have been freed from the slavery of moral accounting. With all due respect to John Chrysostom and John Calvin, and the cloud of conservative readers of St Paul's letter to Philemon, we, of all people, can afford the audacity to try to live disrupted lives, disordered lives in earthly terms and mortal reasoning: and so we must, essay the gospel in the world, so that God-willing, it is one day worthy of God's presence who has chosen here to dwell.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**