

Sermon for St Edmunds, 4th September 2022

Philemon (Fill-Lee-Mon) 1-21

Luke 14:25-43



In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Firstly, a question. I don't need a show of hands, but can I ask you all, how many people have written a letter recently? I don't mean a text, an email or a phone call? A letter. That would not be me. I can read and respond to emails quite quickly – or they never get answered. I reply to what's app messages quite quickly – don't worry if you have no idea what they are – and I can even cope with twitter messages! I am not always good at texting – I prefer to talk to people. I do phone calls for a charity; I do a lot of online stuff – but write a letter – nope. When I was younger it meant getting out the Basildon Bond and matching envelopes. And buying a stamp. Now we have to save up to buy a stamp ... Peter reminded me of the days when we went home from college as students, and neither set of parents were on the phone at home, so we wrote lots of letters. We still have them somewhere – though Peter's are quite safe as no one else can decode his handwriting ...

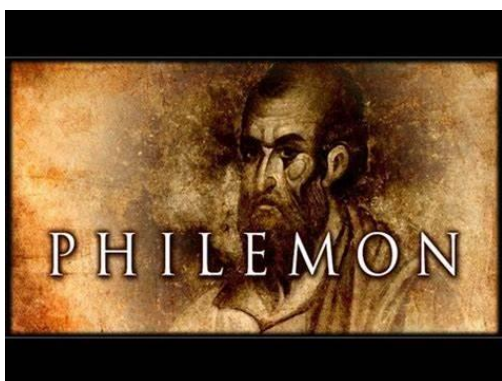


But letters fascinate me. I have stared in wonder at the earliest letters probably written in this country at Vindolanda, the Roman site of a fort on Hadrian's Wall up North. They are little pieces of wood, and I am reliably

informed that they contain requests from soldiers serving on the wall for underwear and warm socks – it’s a bit cold up there - and an invitation to a birthday party which features the first written signature by a woman in Europe that survives. I have two books at home called “Letters of Note”, which are photocopies and transcripts of letters between famous people in history, or that are of great significance. There are letters from children to Presidents, from and to authors, short letters, long letters, typed, scrawled and in different languages. They are the sort of books you can lose an hour or two in very easily – well I can.



One of my favourites is a letter from a certain Jane Austen to her sister admitting that she drank too much wine last night – well, it has happened to many of us.



So there are lots of letters, and our first reading today is a nearly complete letter which was sent by Paul to a friend called Fie Lee Mon. Now as you know much, of the New Testament, apart from the Gospels, is in the form of letters, including several that have been attributed to Paul. Of course, we don’t know what had been written to him to prompt some of the letters, or the situations he was writing to, and several of the letters are addressed to groups and even churches. It makes it difficult to how much Paul felt about some of the things he writes, whether some of his statements were meant for general consumption, or an answer to a specific question. So much ink has been spilt

over what he meant and what that means for Christians ever since, whether what he criticised or condemned was fixed, or just for that situation.



This letter is a more personal one, which includes among its address Apphia our sister – because women played an important part in the life of the early church. Paul is writing because he is sending a special person – Onesimus – back with the letter, a person he has treated well, who has become like a son to him. This is a person who has endured much, even if he is relatively young. He has been of use to Paul as a companion, a brother in Christ. Beyond that, we find out that he was a slave who belonged to Fie Lee Mon, who has been living as a free person. Paul is urging the former master not to treat him as a slave, but as a person in his own right.



Paul is being clever here. On the one hand he is asking for a young man's freedom from slavery and offering to make up the difference if there is any financial loss. But he is also saying that what Paul has done for everyone involved is far more valuable, he introduced them to the love of Christ. He says he is confident that they will see that, that they have received so much.

So what is all my wittering on about letters and Paul's in particular got to do with us? Well, in his letter Paul speaks about slavery, the ownership of another person, their labour, their life chances, every aspect of what they should be able to do for themselves. And slavery has continued over the centuries. The slave trade built empires, cities in this country, and took decades to clear in this country, and much longer in other countries. Well, that's the official version.



There are still many slaves in this country. People working in appalling conditions, with no freedom, no choice, and no hope. And the response of the government? The last anti-slavery commissioner left in April. It is a legal requirement for the Home Office to have one in place, and interviews took place for their successor back in April. We're now in September, and the Home Secretary has still not appointed anyone. It means no big decisions can be made, half the staff dealing with the problem have left the department, and there is no one to keep an eye on the new legislation to deal with the problem. So what, I hear you say? Well, apparently between April and June this year there were 4,171 referrals of people trafficking victims made. That's 4,171 people, at least, potentially suffering all the problems of effective slavery in this country not being properly investigated.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/29/home-office-accused-of-deliberately-leaving-anti-slavery-post-unfilled>



In Derby we have a very active charity in the form of Just Ice, a hand made ice cream company that helps the victims of modern slavery in a practical way. Because there are problems, there are desperate people in our city, and they are usually under the radar.



Beyond Paul's letter we have the Gospel reading from Luke. He says that being a disciple is about planning. Who would undertake a huge building project without first planning it, making sure that it can be afforded, Jesus says. Not

that I watch it, but that television programme “Grand Designs” seems to involve people who do just that – set off on ambitious plans to build a dream home, without getting proper advice, and end up in bad financial situations which affect the lives of themselves and family. We are in the state at the moment where it is impossible to plan for even the short-term future with confidence, with energy prices set to increase for everyone and a full blown cost of living crisis threatened. Churches and other groups have been considering setting up warm centres for people to go to avoid the problems of no heating at home – the ministers of the Allestree churches are meeting in a couple of weeks to see what we can do. For those who prepay for their energy

FOOD BANK SUNDAY



on special keys which must be topped up. For those who have special needs for equipment in order to live and move even around their homes. For those in our communities.

So, we can read Paul’s letter and shake our heads at the idea of slavery in the past. We can condemn those who seek to exploit the work and lives of other humans for their own profit. We can feel sorry for those who are struggling with the basic costs of living. And we can do other things. We can contribute to the debate by writing our own letters, putting pressure on those who may have influence to make a change, to look again at the injustices in our society. We can contribute to the food bank today or in the next few days in the shed as the demand will be greater than ever as every price increases. And we can all pray for those who are fearful, for whom the future seems dark, for the children and vulnerable who will go cold and hungry in the winter to come.

Here's a prayer for social justice [TEXT ON POWERPOINT]

Heavenly Father, we pray for the poorest and most vulnerable.

Let us not just speak of justice, but let us act in just ways.

May the oppressed and needy feel justice and equality

and experience a world without hunger and poverty. Amen.

Julie Barham, 3 September 2022