**Philemon – Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

It’s hard to forgive people, isn’t it? When you’ve been deeply hurt by someone in the past or when someone continues to behave in a way that really hurts, it is so difficult to forgive them and seek reconciliation with them. And I’m certainly not going to stand here today and try to make light of it or suggest five easy steps to forgiving someone or something like that. Sometimes, forgiving someone can take many years, maybe even a lifetime of struggle: and that’s OK – that’s the reality of the situation.

But the Bible does have a lot to say about forgiveness, of course, because our relationship with God is built on the fact that he forgives what we do wrong in our lives and he wants us to do our best to forgive others. It’s at the heart of the Christian message.

And sometimes the Bible teaches us about forgiveness and sometimes it is modelled to us in the stories of the biblical characters. And that’s what we have had in our first reading from Philemon: the story of someone who is being asked to forgive someone else, even though that would be a painful and difficult thing to do. If you want to follow it with me, it’s in the second half of the Bible, the New Testament, on page 232.

What we have here is a letter written from the apostle Paul to a friend of his called Philemon. It’s a short letter about a mutual friend of theirs, called Onesimus. When he wrote the letter, Paul was in prison in Rome. It was one of the last things he wrote, probably in the Summer of AD 62. Paul had just written a letter to the Colossians and had given it to a friend, Tychicus, to deliver and Paul said, “While you are delivering my letter to the Colossians, can you drop this one off at Philemon’s house too, please?”

But what’s the story behind the letter?

Philemon was a wealthy man living in Colossae. And like most rich men of that time, Philemon had slaves and one of those slaves was Onesimus. We don’t know much about Onesimus but we know he wasn’t a good slave: a waste of space and a waste of money. Now, we don’t know what the problem was or why it happened, but something had gone on and Onesimus had run away and stolen some money from Philemon. But where could a slave run to? He had no legal rights, no home, no way of getting a job. He had no hope at all, so he went to the one man who he thought could help him: Paul - the man of God who had treated him well in the past.

And when he is with Paul, he is converted to the Christian faith. But when he is converted, he knows it’s time to return to Philemon; to be reconciled with his master, get the past sorted out so they can move into a new future together. And so Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter urging him to be kind and compassionate in receiving Onesimus.

And Paul wants to appeal to Philemon’s heart in this matter. Right from the start, Paul takes a very different approach in writing this letter than any of his others. In his other letters, Paul claims his position of spiritual authority over the churches by designating himself, ‘Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus’. But here his approach is different because he designates himself, ‘Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus’. This is a very deliberate ploy on Paul’s part, of course, to identify himself as a prisoner so that Philemon will consider him on the same level as the slave Onesimus. Paul is asking for mercy on a man in chains as, himself, a man in chains. Philemon would be in no doubt about the tack that Paul is taking here and, of course, it would be almost impossible for him to refuse Paul’s request to show mercy on Onesimus!

But, of course, Paul is not just referring to his imprisonment in Rome: he is a prisoner ‘of’ Christ Jesus who has more authority in Paul’s life than even the Emperor Nero who was physically imprisoning Paul.

So Paul wants to put some emotional pressure on Philemon to do the right thing and to strengthen his case, in verse 1, he also mentions Timothy who would have been well known to Philemon as well. And Paul designates Timothy as ‘our brother’ in verse 1, reminding Philemon of the fellowship and love that they all share together. So Paul is presenting his own case but also stressing to Philemon that Timothy is in agreement with him too and that would have had even more influence over Philemon’s decision.

As for Philemon himself, we don’t know too much about him other than the fact that he lived in Colossae and must have been very wealthy - not just because he had slaves but because he had a house big enough for there to be a church meeting in it.

Two other people are mentioned in the Greeting of Paul, in verse 2: Apphia and Archippus. It is likely that Apphia was Philemon’s wife. It is more difficult to work out who Archippus was because he is only briefly mentioned here and in Colossians 4:17. But we do know that he was a fine Christian, dedicated to the work of God because Paul describes him here as ‘our fellow soldier’, which speaks volumes about his depth of commitment to the Christian cause.

And just finally with regard to the Greeting, we notice something else from verse 2 that Paul sends his greeting to the church that meets in Philemon’s home. Paul is clearly making the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus a public affair: this is not a private and confidential letter but one that Paul wants to be owned by the whole church community in Philemon’s house. Now again, this would put a huge amount of pressure on Philemon to do the right thing but, as uncomfortable as that would have been for him, it seems to be the right approach because Paul is wanting the whole Christian community to learn about grace and forgiveness through the public reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus. There would be an abiding significance for the church in this pastoral issue and Paul wants to use it as an object lesson to deepen the practical faith of the church there.

And so, in verse 8, Paul comes to the matter in hand; the appeal that he wants to make to Philemon. Paul stresses the fact that Philemon needs to own his decision before God himself and that he is not compelled to do anything, verse 8: “Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love”. Time and time again, we come back to the guiding principle of love in all our interactions…In all things, love is the absolute guiding principle for all we do.

And in a beautifully intimate phrase in verse 9, we learn that Paul’s deep understanding about the priority of love has come through the acquisition of wisdom through many years of ministry: “I then, as Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – appeal to you…” A lifetime of searching for and serving God had brought him to the understanding that love is everything.

In verse 10 and 11, we are introduced to Onesimus: “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, 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.” See how Paul protects him? “I appeal to you about my own child…” Here the great apostle Paul is beseeching the goodness of Philemon on behalf of another.

And Paul doesn’t hide from the reality of the situation: “Formerly, he was useless to you…” But now there has been a transformation in Onesimus’ personality: “…but now he has become useful both to you and to me”. Even here, there is something so gracious about Paul’s approach because he just says that Onesimus had been useless to Philemon but he doesn’t labour the point or catalogue the sins. And perhaps we can learn a lot from that about how we too often criticise people and speak about them behind their back, picking holes in all their weaknesses and failings. Paul shows us a better way: acknowledge the truth – but don’t labour the point.

Finally, Paul deals with the details of reconciliation. When we forgive people and seek reconciliation with them, often there are nitty-gritty pragmatics to deal with. Too often, we hide behind spiritual language rather than effecting true reconciliations: we pretend to be very spiritual and offer forgiveness to others but we leave huge elephants in the room unnamed and patterns of behaviour unchallenged that have led to the division in the first place. If we want to be truly reconciled with others, we need to spiritually forgive and we also need to undertake the hard, uncomfortable work of addressing the practicalities of the problem as well. It is not enough to hide behind a façade of spirituality in an attempt to avoid the hard work of reconciliation. And Paul gives us a really good example of this in verses 18 and 19: “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back.”

And Paul comes to a conclusion by appealing to Philemon’s spiritual heart again, verse 20: “Refresh my heart in Christ”. Paul has been so encouraged by Philemon in past times and he wants nothing more than for Philemon to do the right thing so that he can be even more built up by the example of faithful discipleship. And in verse 21, we see that there is absolutely no doubt in Paul’s mind that Philemon will do the right thing: “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask”.

It is so lovely to read at the end of this brief letter that Paul does not take any of this personally or make any judgement on either Philemon or Onesimus. Once the issue is dealt with, it will be dealt with and everything can go back to normal, or whatever the new normality may look like. And so Paul is able to ask, in verse 22, “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers”. Sadly, that was not to happen and Paul was executed soon after, probably through beheading, but it seems that the bond of friendship between him and the Colossian church was strong. In the final verses, Paul asks for God’s blessing on them and sends the greetings of his fellow workers.

And so this brief letter is completed. And through it, we have learnt a great deal about forgiveness and reconciliation…

First, that forgiveness and reconciliation is a community act. Even though the issue may be a private one, and often should remain so, there is a corporate impact on the Body of Christ when Christians are divided.

Second, that forgiveness and reconciliation is pragmatic as well as spiritual and that we cannot hide behind a façade of holiness as an excuse not to do the real, hard work of sorting out the issues that divide us.

Third, that God can use the negativity of division to bring about a renewed and restored situation stronger than that which existed before. Forgiveness and reconciliation always brings with it a moral transformation through which relationships are strengthened and deepened and brought to a deeper sense of reality than existed before.

The truth is that reconciliation is hard work; it is painful and, if undertaken seriously, can expose some really raw emotions but it must always be worth the effort, no matter what the personal cost to our ego or pride.

C.S. Lewis once said, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive”. But the Body of Christ, and each one of us individually, are called to the hard work of forgiveness. And, in reality, it is probably the most painful thing any one of us can engage in - but it is the heart of the Gospel and is the example of Christ to each one of us.

So there we have the story of Philemon and Onesimus. It’s one of the shortest books in the Bible - but it’s one of the richest books, because it speaks to the very heart of what it means to be a disciple of Christ; to accept God’s forgiveness and move back into a right relationship with him - and then to learn how to forgive others when they hurt us.

There is a Greek proverb that simply says: “To forgive is beautiful”. We want to be a beautiful church. Let the beautifying be founded on our forgiveness, both given and received.