

The Cost of Being a Disciple

By rights, the two lessons we are presented with each Sunday, somehow, should be related to each other. And, by preference, probably, both should be easy to understand, and fairly palatable. On the face of it, both our lessons this morning would seem to fail on both counts.

First, Paul's letter to Philemon.

We rarely hear mention of this *very* short epistle. Bar a couple of lines, this morning we've heard it read in its entirety. As a piece of 'scripture', it's a bit bizarre, really: it's more like a piece of business correspondence, though laced with Paul's subtle and not-so-subtle arm-twisting.

Paul is in prison, writing a letter of petition on behalf of the slave Onesimus. The letter is an appeal to Philemon, whom Paul converted to Christ, and who owns Onesimus, his slave.

While Onesimus has been helping to meet Paul's physical needs in prison, he *also* was converted by Paul. All this seems clear from the letter.

But, Paul doesn't include in the letter all the details that would help us make complete sense of it. Presumably Philemon knows these things already.

How come Onesimus was there in prison with Paul in the first place? Or was he just visiting Paul? Moreover, Paul's, intentionally vague rhetoric, obscures even what he's actually asking Philemon to do. And, we certainly don't know what the outcome is of Paul's cryptic request. So, essentially, it's impossible to be sure, exactly, what teaching is embedded in this enigmatic letter.

Yet, we do know that, from an early stage, someone or some group of Christians felt that it definitely should be preserved and included in the New Testament.

And there are a few clues in the letter suggesting one or more possible backstories, which might help answer our many questions.

Probably the most popular *guess*, that would explain (almost) everything, goes like this:

Onesimus, you see, was a *runaway* slave: no trivial matter in those days. And he must have done something bad, something wrong, to harm his master Philemon. (Although the question of why Onesimus would run away to prison has to be ignored.)

In prison he met Paul. He was *very* supportive of poor old Paul. And, he too was converted to Christ by Paul. Paul was very fond of Onesimus; and really wanted to keep him. But Paul recognized that Onesimus had to be sent back to his owner, Philemon. So in this letter, Paul, using all his powers of persuasion, is asking Philemon, not only to take Onesimus back, and to forgive him. But also, because Philemon and Onesimus are now both brothers in Christ, Philemon should officially grant Onesimus his freedom.

And this letter has been preserved, because everyone guessed that this indeed, *was* the outcome of the letter.

Thus, the take-home message becomes,

‘When you are welcomed into the Church, into the body of Christ, the ‘*cost*’ is that the *priorities* and values of the world must be replaced by the *priority* of a new love and freedom such that forgiveness, reconciliation and true brotherhood - and sisterhood - are now possible.’

And our Gospel Reading from Luke also addresses the *cost* of being a disciple. But with a text that more urgently screams out for an explanation, particularly the second verse!

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters - yes even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple.”

You've got to ‘hate’ your father, and ‘hate’ your mother and ‘hate’ your whole family, and to ‘hate yourself as well, to be Jesus’ disciple.

Now, if reading this verse isn't an object lesson in the danger of plucking single verses out of their context, be it of a whole chapter, or whole gospel or, indeed, the whole Bible, then I don't know what is.

The foolishness of expecting that, of course, a single verse can stand alone as the unquestionable ‘Word of God’, can lead to a travesty in understanding.

Many single verses, and tiny chunks of scripture have similarly been spirited out of their setting, looted and weaponized by some to prove that their moral position is unassailable because it is the *Word of God*.

Yes, the Bible is the Word of God. It's a book telling us what God wants us to know. But it's *not* like a car manual, or an 'uninspired' reference book. Rather it's much more the record of God's long, extended conversation with his people. A conversation by which God has patiently and steadfastly edged them forward to discover the mysterious depths of the *source* of all Truth and Love ... and in *preparation* for the ultimate disclosure of Himself to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Son, at once *fully* God, *and fully* human.

Alive, *now*, in and amongst us, *now* in this celebration of Holy Communion.

Nevertheless I'm quite happy to believe that the words we heard this morning are a fair record, and translation, of what Jesus actually said to that "large crowd" that was following him.

So why did our 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' use such a cruel and emotive word as "hate"?

Most, if not all, scholars pass over it as: 'Well, you know, a bit of exaggeration'. However I like, better the thought expressed by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams who, when asked about those things which, for him, made Jesus so compelling a person, replied,

"It's an odd thing to say about the figure of Jesus in the Gospels, but I've always been struck by it - from time to time there's a deep impatience in Jesus: How can I make this clear to you? You're an unfaithful generation. He bursts out in exasperation at the disciples. Do you understand nothing? Even in exasperation of the crowds. Jesus said: "You're all looking for miracles."

And Rowan continues,

"In a strange way I feel that's a rather compelling aspect of the story of Jesus. There's more going on in him than he can express, and sometimes it kind of bursts out. And when I think of what the divinity of Jesus means in that context, one of the signs of it is that feeling he's got more to say than human language can carry. As he says in John's

Gospel, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

So, do we hear in Jesus' words this morning, that very human exasperation? I'm persuaded that we *do*. It's as if Jesus is saying.

"Oh for goodness sake, to follow me you've got to ... hate your family"
... in other words, I think Jesus is saying here,

"If you're *serious* about God, then your search for God, and your learning and knowing about what God is truly like, has to be your *priority* over and above everything else."

"And don't expect this is going to be easy, or just a sort of hobby for Sundays. I tell you that you *too* will have a cross to bear."

Yet, we know the larger context of even this startling demand. Jesus goes to the Cross to save us *despite* our indifference. Yes, our intermittent and feeble efforts to follow Jesus will be judged. But we *also* know that God's love for us is *so immense*, that he will have *mercy* on us.