

15th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

Philemon, Luke 14.25-35

Introduction

You've all seen the movie, or read the book or watched the TV show where the story centres on a guy who was on the run from the law comes back home to a small country town. Before he did a runner, he was a lazy, listless, thief who betrayed his employer and helped himself to a large amount of money. Now, some time later, he's come back a changed man. He's honest, hardworking, repentant and focused. He's come back to his former employer to not only ask for forgiveness but for his job back...with the promise that he'll be working really hard to make up for his betrayal and for the good of the business. But the interesting thing is that someone really well known – almost family, like a brother – really well known to the guy's former employer has sent a letter. And that letter says the runaway thief has changed... and changed for the better – and not only that, he's been working closely alongside him for a long time, so yes the change is for real... trust him as you would trust me.

Now there might not be an exact story along those lines, but the sort of thing is pretty familiar to us from popular culture. The story of redemption and reconciliation is still particularly powerful because it resonates either with our own experience or that of someone we may know or have heard about – even if it's not as dramatic as a film or TV series. But there's really something even in seeing it happen, especially when the person who's been redeemed has undergone a powerful and dramatic change. But it's not simply a powerful story in popular culture. It's also a really powerful story in Christianity. And the powerful story of redemption and reconciliation isn't simply the subject of many a thing that Jesus has to say or do. It's also the subject of our reading from the Letter of Paul to Philemon.

In Philemon we have the lazy, listless, thief on the run from the law; the thief who betrayed his employer and helped himself to a large amount of money. His name is Onesimus. Who's the employer? Philemon. Who's the one who says 'trust him as you

would trust me'? Paul. What's the new relationship between Onesimus and Philemon? Like brothers.

Letter to Philemon: Onesimus has changed; he's now a brother!

To go from thief to brother is almost beyond comprehension. What's changed Onesimus? Who has so dramatically intervened in his life to turn him about, to turn him from a grasping, listless, lazy, runaway slave to someone who could be counted on to live up to his name of being useful, to stand tall with a new character, to make him set things right with those he's betrayed? Paul. And who changed Paul from a violent persecutor of the church into a Christian? Jesus. How else could such a dramatic turnaround occur? How could such a dramatic change in character happen? How could someone's life be so utterly altered? Jesus. This is a story of deep personal transformation. This is an example of what can happen when a person's life is opened up to the gospel – the teaching, the life, the death, the new life of Jesus – opened up to the gospel totally and utterly. This was the change for Onesimus. This is the change for us. This is the change for you.

Jesus

Today, Jesus is laying down the challenge of challenges; he's not a politician trying to win over the crowd; he's the leader of an expedition heading into dangerous territory with much-needed supplies for a community cut off by wild weather. The words he says today sound harsh – hate your family, give up your possessions, carry your own method of death – sound so harsh that we could be forgiven for trying to avoid or ignore this kind of stuff and focus on some of the other things he says at other points in the gospel. If we did that though, I think it'd be a mistake, albeit a natural one. So what's Jesus telling us? And how can it change us? How can it *transform* us?

Jesus announced God's new way of running things. Two of the biggest markers of identity for the people of Israel revolved around two things: family and land. Israel was identified as Abraham's family, a single ethnic unit. And they were also identified as the people who lived in a special land. The land was their ancestral possession, and woe betide anyone who compromised with it. Now Jesus wasn't denying the need to be able

to live somewhere, to have something to eat and the land to grow it, nor was he denying the importance of close family and the need for living in supportive harmony with them. What he was getting at was that these things no longer exclusively define God's people.

Thus family and possessions are the two things Jesus now says they've got to give up. God's people are being radically redefined and these identity makers won't matter anymore. Cling onto them, and they'll be like people keeping the curtains closed when the sun has risen. That was the night time; this is the daytime.

Take Onesimus. He could easily, as part of his identity, frame himself as a hard done by slave, who'd been overworked and been justified in taking money and running away. It was also easy – the clues are there in the letter – for his identity to be built on how others saw him: lazy, listless and a thief. But, just as Jesus redefines the identity of the people of God, he also redefines the identity of Onesimus; hence his dramatic turnaround. Jesus has overturned his life. Jesus has now redefined him.

So the challenge of Jesus comes to us, to all of us at the point where we are tempted to settle down and be comfortable with the way things are. 'No,' he says, 'that would be like someone trying to build a tower, or fight a battle, without thinking what's involved.' You need to think through, pray through, what it's going to mean to be a follower, a learner, a disciple, a *Christian*. You don't want to be left high and dry when God's kingdom goes forward and you turn out to have settled for less. Jesus is redefining us. Not in the way that he redefined the people of his then, generation. He redefines us, *as he did Onesimus*. He's now calling you to give up the things that hold you back from following him. That holds you back from living out the vision of the Gospel. That holds you back from entering the gateway to a life beyond imagination. A life that is full of excitement and wonder, peace and joy, faith and hope. A life that is part of God's future, lived out *right now*: right now in prayer; right now in the Eucharist; right now in your very selves.

We're turning our back on everything that's wrong with this world: rebellion, deceit, corruption, evil and sin and turning towards the life of God, seeking to be one of his people and changing and discarding all that holds us back from that great promise to drink from the river of the water of life.