

ALL WELCOME?

Philemon [MW19-25]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 17 November 2019

A woman called the church office because she wanted her cat, Homer, baptised! The Vicar explained that this was a little out of his line and referred her to the Presbyterian Church down the street. Later, the Vicar learned that the Presbyterians had referred the woman to a Methodist minister, who had referred her to someone else. About an hour later, she called the Vicar back, very frustrated. The woman said she was at her wit's end, couldn't find anyone to baptise Homer, and didn't know what to do. She said she planned to give one thousand dollars to the church of the minister who performed this service for Homer. The Vicar took only a moment to mull this over, and then he said to her, "Well, why didn't you tell me Homer was an Anglican cat?!"

In another Diocese where I was Vicar, our Bishop objected strongly, very strongly

- to the words "All Welcome" being used on church noticeboards and church pew sheets
- because, he said, I have been to your church services and it is just not true! all are most definitely NOT welcome in our churches

Food for thought???

Back in Ephesians a couple of weeks ago we reminded ourselves

- about what was so very different and very distinctive in this new community of people we call the "church"
- it was so very different and very distinctive back then but perhaps it has worn off over the millennia and we kind of take it for granted
- *those who were far away have been brought near*
- *those who were once alienated and enemies are now united in the same family*

It is worth highlighting that the Greek word "ekklesia", translated as "church"

- never, never, never referred to a building or structure it was always, always, always a gathering of people specifically this new community, the body of Christ
- "ekklesia" embraced the fact that it was about relationships it was dynamic it was about who and how they were as a group

All this we need to keep in mind as the background, the framework

- behind the letter which Paul wrote to Philemon which we heard part of being read today
- just as a quick question: how many chapters in Philemon?

Rob Suggs, the person who wrote the Bible study we are doing at the moment

- thinks that this letter has something valuable to tell us about everybody being welcome
- he writes: the fellowship of believers is intended to be a place of healing, forgiveness and *equality*
- in this short letter, extremely exceedingly short for Paul! Paul writes to a person called Philemon
- it is the most personal of all Paul's letters the tone and the way it was written suggests Paul and Philemon were good friends

Now Philemon had become a believer, a follower of Jesus the Christ

- Philemon was also very wealthy
he had a large house which was used for church gatherings
and he owned slaves

Slaves in the Roman world were not really seen as people

- they had no rights
and their owners could do whatever they wanted with them or to them
- you might wonder that these early Christians didn't end the practice of slavery
they did not, but what they did do was revolutionary
the “ekklesia”, the church, this new community gathered in Jesus' name
treated slaves as people, as worthy, as equal even
- in Galatians 3:28 Paul wrote:

Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham's family, and you will be given what God has promised.

In spite of this Onesimus, a slave in Philemon's household, runs away

- not only that but he steals from the household when he goes
a 'double crime'
- some time later Paul meets Onesimus
maybe they are in the same jail – Paul is writing while imprisoned, again!
- maybe Paul was the one who helped Onesimus become a follower of Jesus
maybe some other experience turned Onesimus's life around
but the fact remains they met and became friends
- indeed Onesimus proved himself very helpful to Paul
who in return came to regard him like a son
- in fact Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus with him
he was able to assist Paul in the mission of preaching about Jesus
he would miss him when he was gone

But Paul is now sending Onesimus back to Philemon because it is the right thing to do

- however Paul urges Philemon to have mercy
to accept the returning slave as a Christian brother
even to grant Onesimus freedom
- this is huge, big, bigger than enormous

As we have noted, early Christian teaching had an influence on this

- but the fact remains that Onesimus was bad
he ran away, he stole, he deserves to be punished
- however Paul goes further than saying Onesimus should not be punished
further even than asking for Onesimus to be accepted
- he pleads that Onesimus be welcomed ... welcomed!

Paul writes that before this Onesimus, whose name means “useful or beneficial”

- was actually useless, no use at all in the household where he was a slave
but now he has shown himself to be useful to Paul and Philemon
- through the gospel message someone use/less has become *useful*
Onesimus now lived up to his name
- once again Paul shows humour – this time with a pun!

Onesimus has repented, become trustworthy

- so all good then ... ?
but just take a moment to consider in a clear and logical and rational manner what Paul is asking
- there is a social gap between Onesimus and Philemon
in fact it is a yawning chasm
- Onesimus has committed crimes against the very household where the church meets
- how can he possibly be accepted, let alone welcomed ...

Rob Suggs writes:

If it is improbable that Onesimus will fit into this group of Christians, it is equally improbable that they will accept him. Onesimus is not the only one who needs to change. Philemon and his household must also rethink their values and their social attitudes.

Yet this is precisely what is so distinctive and different and radical

- about this new way of being a community, being church that they can and do welcome, not just accept, but welcome people like Onesimus and those in similar situations
- there is reconciliation and new beginning

Paul writes:

If you consider me a friend because of Christ, then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. If he has cheated you or owes you anything, charge it to my account. With my own hand I write: I, PAUL, WILL PAY YOU BACK. But don't forget that you owe me your life. My dear friend, I pray that the Lord will make you useful to me and that, as a follower of Christ, you will cheer me up.

Note that Paul says if Philemon wishes to be all legalistic, he - Paul - will pay the debt

- and if he really wishes to get fussy about it and push the point Paul points out that in fact Philemon owes him his life
- and this is just what our position is with Jesus Christ we are sinners who deserved punishment before Christ intervened Christ paid our debt and made us welcome at the Lord's table
- Paul is imitating Christ in being a reconciler and welcoming penitent sinners and so Paul charges Philemon, and us, to imitate him in this
- oh, and did you catch that other pun by Paul he prays Philemon will prove *useful* to Paul by welcoming Onesimus!

So, all welcome?

- yes indeed
Paul goes to great lengths to make sure this is so
- no one is outside, no one is beyond the pale not even a lazy, thieving, runaway slave
- in this new grouping of people, gathered in Jesus' name, the church preachers, land-owners, scholars are the same value as women and slaves

Rob Suggs makes a telling comment:

- in a status obsessed world,
this is a difficult truth even for Christians to digest

When Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes moved to Washington, D.C., to take up his duties as chief justice, he transferred his membership to a Baptist church in the area. It was the custom for all new members to come to the front of the sanctuary at the close of the worship service. The first to be called that morning was Ah Sing, a Chinese laundryman who had moved to the capital from the West coast. He took his place at the far side of the church. As the dozen or so other people were called forward they stood at the opposite side of the church, leaving Ah Sing standing alone. But when Chief Justice Hughes was called, he took his place beside the laundryman. When the minister had welcomed the group into the church fellowship he turned to the congregation and said, "I do not want this congregation to miss this remarkable illustration of the fact that at the cross of Jesus Christ the ground is level."

What does this all mean?

- at the very least it reinforces that everyone is invited and that everyone is supposed to be welcome
- I guess in the first instance, like that Bishop I told you about we want to ensure that these words ring true that our actions show we really do welcome everyone

So, if that's our aim – how can we do that?

- how can we welcome, truly welcome, people?
I hope we have welcomed each other here, those we already know
- what about new people, visitors, those that never even make it up the drive ... ?

Please take a moment to think, talk to those around you

- and let's see if we can come up with anything practical

[space to think and talk]

Time for sharing ...

What shall I do with the stranger?

Invite him to my house, and treat him like a brother, so that he may become one

Prayer to close ...

*Heavenly Father, we are you sons and daughters,
we gather as sisters and brothers in Christ
accepting the responsibility this places upon us:
to love one another as you have loved us.
May we live as your lights in this dark world.
Through our words and our lives
may others come to recognise their place
as daughters and sons in your family.
In Jesus' name we pray.
AMEN.*