

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [C]

Wisdom 9: 13 - 18

Philemon: 9 - 10, 12 - 17

Luke 14: 25 - 33

In the bad snow we had earlier this year, although the Close I live in is only on a slight incline, I couldn't get my car up or down it.

I got very frustrated, and 'stir crazy' because I couldn't get around in the way I usually do, and was cooped up at home.

I felt as if I was under house arrest - just as Paul was under house arrest in Rome when he wrote his Letter to Philemon, from which we've just heard an extract.

Philemon lived in Colossae; but he'd become a Christian through hearing Paul preach in Ephesus - about 100 miles away - which was Paul's base in that area.

Paul had been so encouraged at the way in which Philemon, his Wife, Apphia, and their Son, Archippus had responded to his preaching about Jesus because they'd gone home to Colossae, and made their home a place of love and hospitality, where the handful of Christians in the area began to meet.

And this group of Christians were the Church to whom Paul wrote his Letter to the Colossians. But Paul has a very difficult problem. To us, it might seem a simple problem to solve, but we don't live in his world.

You see, Philemon owned slaves.....

To Philemon, and anyone else of substance in the Roman world, it was as natural as owning a car or a television is to us.

Slavery is abhorrent to us; but people then couldn't imagine doing without them.

Telling them - if we could get in a time-machine and travel back - they should abolish slavery, would be as realistic as suggesting to ourselves that we should abandon all electrical appliances, and do away with cars and planes.

To get back to Paul's problem....

Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, had run away to Rome - probably stealing some of his master's money as well - and found Paul.

Maybe he'd heard Philemon's family speak so warmly of Paul that Onesimus thinks that he is the only person who can help him.

For, the punishment inflicted on runaway slaves, if they were caught, was execution by crucifixion.

Under Paul's influence Onesimus became a Christian, and a great helper and companion to Paul. He became a brother in Christ to Paul.

When he was under house arrest it meant Paul lived on his own in a house, but with a soldier to guard him at all times; and he couldn't go out.

Onesimus was a lifeline to him of Christian fellowship, and simple human friendship.

But now Paul was going to make tremendous demands of both Philemon and Onesimus, which would involve a great personal sacrifice for him.

He was going to send Onesimus back to Philemon, and ask Philemon to accept him back without any penalty being imposed on the slave.

Everything in that society was against it, so you can imagine the feelings on both sides.

If everybody did that, the world would grind to a halt!

Philemon would be shunned by all of his friends because, if runaway slaves got away with running away, then they'd all want to do it!

Yet even more mind-blowing than that, Paul says to Philemon: "I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."

Philemon: 12, 15 - 16

Paul not only wants Onesimus not to have to face the death-penalty; he actually wants Philemon to free Onesimus from slavery, and make him part of the family!

Paul knew all the arguments against it; but he outflanks them all with the Gospel message of Jesus the Lord before whom he, Philemon, Onesimus, and all Christians are 'slaves' - servants - of the Lord.

Paul wants both Philemon and Onesimus to face up to the consequences of what Onesimus did, but to transform it in the light of their faith in Jesus.

For all three of them it was going to involve living out their faith in the real world in which they lived.

Onesimus would have to trust his very life into Philemon's hands; and Philemon, in forgiving and freeing Onesimus would have to face all the consequences that would inevitably bring down on him in Roman society.

Paul, for the good of Philemon and Onesimus would have to give up something that was very dear to him.

By sending Onesimus - his brother in Christ - back to Philemon, Paul would have experienced in reality those words Jesus uses in today's Gospel: "Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." Lk. 14: 33

But he knew in these circumstances this is what he had to do because the Gospel, after all, isn't simply a message about how people get 'saved' in a purely spiritual way.

It's about the Lordship of Jesus, the Prince of Peace and the Universal King, over the real world, over people's real lives, over the difficult decisions we all face in our daily lives.

To use that awful modern terminology; there mustn't be a 'disconnect' between being a Christian on the inside - spiritually - and how we conduct our outward lives in the secular world.

We don't follow a saccharin Saviour wearing a grin. We follow a Saviour who demands that we take up our own cross, along with His Cross, and follow Him.

The other dimension to this is that Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are equal before the Lord because of their Baptism.

They were living examples of the words Paul had written to the Christians in Rome in his Letter to the Romans: "When we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death. For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives." Rm. 6: 3 - 4

When people believe in Jesus, and join His family - the Church - through Baptism, we become one with Him, and each other.

Well, we don't hear the outcome of Paul's Letter to Philemon - or do we?

Some 50 to 60 years after Paul wrote to Philemon, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was on his way to his martyrdom in Rome.

As he passed Ephesus he wrote a letter to the Christians in that city in which he has much to say about their highly regarded Bishop, Onesimus.

Is it possible that this young runaway slave had been welcomed home by Philemon - rather like the Prodigal Son in the Gospel - rose to prominence in the Church, and became the Bishop of an entire province?

It just shows that the living sign of our Baptism is that we grow together in His love, cutting right across all the man-made barriers that separate one human being from another.

Because: "Christ himself has brought peace to us, [and] broken down the wall of hostility that separated us by means of his death on the cross. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us." Eph. 2: 14, 16 & 18