

## Sunday Evening Service 21st July 2013 - Jack McHugh, Philemon: "Onesimus redeemed and restored."

In pondering the background story behind this letter of Paul's to Philemon, Jack was reminded of the notices we all see these days in stores and shops: 'Credit Cards Accepted Here'. We purchase goods or services and then present a piece of plastic that indicates that credit has been extended to us by a bank to enable us to pay without physically handing over actual cash. In this letter Paul is proposing that Philemon 'extends credit' to Onesimus for which Paul will be the guarantor. Paul is asking Philemon to charge whatever Onesimus owes to Paul's 'account'.

This short passage from Scriptures makes only passing reference to what must have been an emotionally charged and challenging story regarding Onesimus's fall from grace, flight from justice, conversion and eventual readiness to answer for past crimes.

Having been responsible for Onesimus's instruction in and conversion to the Christian faith Paul now has to decide what to do with the runaway slave. Onesimus is no longer a rebel and a thief but a believing brother in Christ. Paul has respect for the law and is aware of the dire consequences that Onesimus's crimes could entail. But Paul is also aware of Philemon's strong Christian character and he pulls out all the stops in appealing to Philemon on Onesimus's behalf. He appeals to Philemon's Christian love rather than just a sense duty. *"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love."* He entreats Philemon to forgive, restore and receive Onesimus as a Christian brother.

Philemon is a letter that is infrequently the subject of sermons or Bible study sessions yet it teaches a lot about Christian forgiveness and love. It also emphasises the sense of 'brotherhood' that should pertain among Christians - an equality under Christ that should be evident irrespective of social status, wealth, learning or other gifts. Paul urges Philemon to treat Onesimus as a 'brother' in the same way he would treat Timothy or Paul himself. Paul suggests that he has perceived God's hand at work in the succeeding episodes of Onesimus's life such that the former runaway slave has now been reformed and equipped by God through Paul's ministry to be eminently more useful, not just to Philemon but also to Paul and to the Christian church in the spreading of the Gospel. *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."*

We too need to place the love of Christ at the heart of our relationships with others especially those not yet converted and not judge them on account of their unbelief. To judge unbelievers in this way is to judge Christ Himself since, but for the grace of God, we too would be unredeemed, languishing in unbelief. As John's Gospel reminds us: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* John 13:35.

Onesimus must have been very nervous about returning to Colosse to face the music but, thanks to Paul, he has been changed from being excluded to being included; from having no rights to enjoying the advocacy of a mentor and 'father'.

Paul does not actually tell Philemon to free Onesimus but he comes close. Paul is confident that God will cause the right course of action to be adopted by Philemon. There's a lesson in this for us. We often give up on people too easily when we should get more involved and take a chance on them for a second or third time or for however long it takes.

Paul's letter is a wonderful example of substitutionary atonement. It also highlights the parallels between us and Onesimus. Jesus paid for our sins through the Cross so that we can be freed to serve God without fear. The Bible is our standard assurance that we are no longer captive to sin - our debt has been paid by Christ. God is able to turn things around and Onesimus the slave is restored - not for a week or a month or a year but forever. The once useless slave to sin is being restored, for useful service, to his master. It's the same for each of us. Only now that we have been redeemed by Jesus are we too useful in the Master's

service. And what a privilege it is to serve!

Paul knows that if he had turned up at Philemon's house in Colosse he would have been fêted. This is what he is asking for Onesimus. The father will accept us in the same way because we can come into His presence clothed in the righteousness bestowed by His Son.