

St. Raphael's Mt. Rat, St. Augustine's Stansbury &

St. Benedict's Minlaton

Pentecost 15, 5 September 2010

Philemon

The letter to Philemon is one of the shortest in the bible. Yet within it is carried a powerful message, and one which perhaps brings a couple of surprises with it. It is a story which would have been immensely challenging in the first century world, some of which challenge is muted by our changed context two millennia later.

It is also a story which is very appropriate on a day when we celebrate a baptism at Minlaton for it is a story of transformation – of people through their experience of the transforming power of God having their understanding of the world in which they live, and the way in which they relate to others radically altered.

Paul is imprisoned in Rome. Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave whom Paul has met during his imprisonment and who he has come to know as a Christian. Philemon is a householder and church leader in Colossae, alongside Archippus and Apphia. Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran away. Paul now sends him back to Philemon asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Many believe Onesimus went on to become a bishop in Ephesus.

First, despite the wishes of those who like to rattle at unjust social structures, Paul did not challenge the institution of slavery – something which is quite discomfiting to many of us 2000 years later. It was part of his social world and as with any social context, those that are part of it cannot really imagine life differently.

But Paul had a problem – Onesimus. Standing before him as a fellow Christian was a slave. Now in the debates of his time it wasn't clear whether slaves were to be viewed as people or things. After all, a person had freedom of choice and association. A slave had neither. But here was Onesimus, who had been immensely supportive of Paul and helpful in his mission. So, what is Paul to do?

The Christian scriptures are annoyingly full of examples where an encounter with a person who falls outside our way of understanding

the world changes our world view. Or at least forces us to act differently. Such it is with Onesimus.

So what does Paul do? He sends Onesimus back to Philemon commending him as a loved brother in the Lord. This encounter hasn't led Paul to challenge the institution of slavery. He has not generalized Onesimus into an issue. It is Onesimus who God has placed before Paul, and not an issue. This is not about slavery as such, it is about Onesimus. But accepting Onesimus will have profound implications in understanding this thing called slavery. For accepting Onesimus into the fellowship as an equal does a couple of socially quite radical things. It determines once and for all that a slave is a person – after all only a person can be treated as equal, only a person can exercise the choice to be a person of faith, and only a person can be admitted into free fellowship with others. This action set the Christian community apart from the world around it – not by the way it acted towards the world, but by the way it acted within itself.

Paul and the Colossian church did not seek to change their world by telling others how to act. They changed the way they acted. And now, 2000 years later, in communities which stand in that tradition, slavery is inconceivable. They changed the way they live and ultimately changed the way they thought and the world in which they lived. And all this transformation came through a personal encounter with someone whose life had been touched by God. Baptism is about a transforming encounter with God. Every time we baptise we place ourselves in the way of such a transforming encounter; and we believe that every one whom we baptise is thus touched by God and transformed. And just perhaps, through that, a seed will be planted which transforms the world in which we live to reflect more fully the glory of Christ.