

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 38

Wednesday 15th July 2020

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this midweek edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. Continuing our series on Biblical characters in prison, I look at Paul’s letter to Philemon with its further insights into how Paul used his time of imprisonment fruitfully.

Scripture Passage

Philemon

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-- and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother -- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more-- prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Reflection

Paul was imprisoned many times during his ministry. So much so that Paul was able to say that ‘the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me.’ (Acts 20:23). So, Paul was imprisoned at Jerusalem and then sent as a prisoner to await trial in Rome.

It is likely that Paul’s letter to Philemon which is given in its entirety above probably dates from Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.

Philemon was a wealthy slave owning Christian who lived in Colossae in modern day Turkey. Onesimus one of his slaves had escaped and fled to Rome. While he was in Rome he somehow came into contact with Paul and subsequently became a Christian. Onesimus proved to be very useful to Paul as his physical freedom was constrained by imprisonment.

So how did Paul spend his time in prison? How did this time become fruitful and significant despite these physical constraints? Anna commenting last week on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, another letter from prison, drew our attention to Paul’s continuing joy, thankfulness for his fellow believers, prayerfulness and perseverance.

In the letter to Philemon we also find this prayerfulness and sense of connection with fellow believers. This emerges particularly in Paul’s opening and closing greetings. Paul sees himself as a continuing member of Christian community which is joined together by prayers, faith and love.

At the beginning of the letter Paul names his co-worker Timothy and as recipients of the letter speaks of Aphia and Archippus as well as Philemon. And at the end he mentions Epaphras as a fellow prisoner while Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke are also named as part of the Christian community in Rome who send their greetings to the Christian community in

Colossae. The careful inclusion of these names reminds us that those whom we love as part of our Christian community are not numbers but individuals who have their own unique identity.

The letter to Philemon also contains some very specific insights into the fruitful use of a time of imprisonment. These centre around the relationship which Paul developed with the runaway slave Onesimus.

The literal meaning of Onesimus's name in the Greek is 'useful'. However, it is very likely that Philemon saw Onesimus as a runaway slave as being very far from living up to this name of 'useful'. Paul plays on this paradox when he writes to Philemon,

I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

So a transformation in Onesimus' life had occurred. From being useless, he is now said to be useful both to Philemon and to Paul. How did this transformation take place?

First of all, we need of course to recognise the action of the Holy Spirit in effecting this dramatic change in Onesimus' character. But in human terms we also need to recognise the role that Paul himself played. Paul says that he has become Onesimus' father. This is clearly not a literal expression but what does Paul mean?

It was no doubt Paul who explained the gospel to Onesimus and encouraged him to place his trust in Christ. And from that point on it would have been Paul who nurtured and encouraged that faith so that its fruits became evident. And as Onesimus' character changed so he began truly to live up to his name of 'useful'.

The role that Paul played in the transformation of Onesimus' life reminds us that no-one comes across our path by accident and potentially everyone gives us an opportunity to show God's love and concern. We may sometimes be tempted to regard some people as not being so important. However, potentially everyone can be useful to God and to others and we may be the ones to help them discover how to realise this potential.

And although imprisonment or confinement does involve physical constraints very often it also releases an incredibly precious gift, the gift of time. Paul's relationship as a spiritual father to Onesimus required time and an ongoing commitment on his part. His circumstances gave him that time and he was able to use this time to make a profound impact on the life of a fellow human being.

There is perhaps one final aspect of this letter which we may find to be of particular contemporary relevance. As the history of slavery in this country comes under the spotlight in various ways what has this text to say to us?

We have to say first of all that slavery, a pervasive institution in the Roman and Greek world of the time, is not directly addressed in the letter. It is difficult, for instance, to know whether Paul was seeking Onesimus' full emancipation and freedom.

However, indirectly, the perspective which this letter gives us on the ancient institution of slavery is a powerful and transformative one. Philemon is asked, to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a 'beloved brother' and to welcome him in the same way as he would have welcomed Paul himself. In the other words, in the kingdom of God all the outward social distinctions cease to matter and a new set of relationships in which we are brothers and sisters is established. And this kingdom cannot be established by any human legislation. Rather the kingdom of God is open to all of us whatever our position in life and we enter it through trust in Christ and a transformed heart.

This perspective emerges through the New Testament as a whole and is seen particularly clearly in Galatians 3:28 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28).

The notes to the English Standard Version Study Bible put it this way, 'There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for the institution of slavery to survive in the atmosphere of love created by the letter, and in fact the elements of Paul's appeal found in this letter helped lay the foundation for the abolition of slavery.'

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- For our spiritual growth and discipleship as we respond to the good news of Jesus Christ, for finding the opportunities to encourage and build up others in their faith
- For Camelot churches in responding to the reopening for private prayer and public worship
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Need for further largescale testing and research into and development of a vaccine as soon as this can be achieved
- Prayers for parents, teachers, governors and children of North Cadbury Church of England Primary School as the school is partially reopened, prayers also for Horsington school
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed

- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)