

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 171

Sunday 4th September 2022

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

Welcome

Welcome back to Cutting Edge Camelot.

Scripture Passages

Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your

consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Luke 14: 25-33

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?

²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

³¹ "Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Reflection

Our family has been journeying through Southern Africa for most of August. And there the extremes of affluence and poverty set side by side have been impossible to miss. Perhaps we are more insulated in this country from such extremes. Nevertheless, factors such as the rise in the use of foodbanks and the cost-of-living crisis where many people will need to make a choice this winter between being warm and having food remind us that these issues are relevant here as well.

So as Christians this presents us with us a challenge. How are we to use the possessions that we have been given? How do we respond both to God and to the many needs that we see around us?

On a lighter note I found the hold that possessions can exert illustrated by our flight out to South Africa. I think it is fair to say that Lufthansa seemed to be feeling the pinch and they were not giving out any items for free. But they did make an exception in the case of children and offered them on boarding the plane a free plastic toy Lufthansa airline captain's hat. The problem was, however, that even then their generosity did not stretch that far because there was only one hat between two children. Let us just say that the principles of sharing were stretched and that the question of who owned the hat caused some lively, even impassioned debate.

I cannot say that the hat ever appealed to me and indeed when it seemed to disappear at some point in our travels I have to say that I was very glad. On the other hand is this game about who owns what one that we can continue to play as we grow up? Only the objects become more complex and sophisticated. The hold that possessions can exert over us is very real.

On the road to Jerusalem Jesus speaks in various ways about the cost of discipleship. This is sacrificial and must come above all other commitments even those of family and indeed life itself.

Jesus concludes by focussing on the specific issue of possessions. He tells us starkly that, 'none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.'

So is this command to be taken literally by all disciples? Other parts of the New Testament suggest that this may not be so. For instance, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles we are given insights into the practice of the very earliest church. This church was indeed extraordinarily generous and disciples shared their possessions with one another to relieve those of their number who were in poverty.

So Barnabas, for instance, sold a field and laid the proceeds of the sale at the apostles' feet for them to distribute as part of a common fund. But was this the entirety of Barnabas' worldly wealth or did he have further assets? It seems that there was no obligation for him to sell all that he has for later on a couple called Ananias and Sapphira also sell some property and give the proceeds to the apostles. However, in their case they only give part of the proceeds and pretend that these represent the whole. So they conceal the fact that they have retained the other part for their own use.

Ananias and Sapphira face severe punishment for this as they are both struck dead by God. However, the apostle Peter makes it clear that the punishment does not relate to their only giving part of the proceeds but to their deceit in pretending that they had given the whole amount to the church's common fund. Peter tells them that when the land was unsold it belonged to them. And when it was sold it was entirely their decision as to how they used the proceeds of sale. They had no obligation to give the whole amount. It was their choice as to how much they gave. Their sin consisted in their deceit.

So we could interpret this command to give up all our possessions as a calling to hold lightly to our possessions but not necessarily to abandon them completely. However, part of this holding light means that if we

receive a specific call from God to give up a valued possession that we value we need to obey this call as part of our discipleship.

Some might think that this is watering down this call too far. Certainly some Christians through the ages, particularly those called to live in religious communities, have taken this command entirely. However, even if we are interpreting it as a willingness if needed to give up our possessions for the sake of Christ we are in effect handing God a 'blank cheque' in relation to them. When we issue this cheque we do not know when and how God might choose to fill this in for us with a specific amount.

And in our gospel passage, Jesus does give us some specific examples to illustrate this general principle of the sacrificial aspect of the Christian life. The first comes from commercial life and is readily understood. If we were undertaking any building project would we begin it without first having an estimate of its cost? This would seem very foolish and very few people would do this. Because if we began building without having an estimate of the cost we might be unable to complete our project. Giving the work up halfway will attract ridicule from other people.

Counting the cost is an important practical principle in many areas of life. For instance, we may rush in to volunteer our help in a rush of impulsive enthusiasm. And yet we may never have sat down first to weigh up what such help may require of us and whether we have the resources to keep this up over the long term. Then if we need later on to withdraw it can make life more difficult for those whom we have volunteered to help than if we had never made any offer in the first place.

Then Jesus gives us another example this time drawn from military life. He tells us that no king engages in war without calculating the chances of victory. And if the cost of such military engagement cannot be borne by the nation then he will sue for peace rather than embarking on a war which he cannot win.

When we turn to our extract from Paul's letter to Philemon we find another instance of how Christian discipleship can involve a specific material sacrifice.

This letter is written from one of the numerous imprisonments which Paul suffered in the course of his ministry. In his introduction Paul speaks about the encouragement and love which Paul has received from Philemon and the ministry which he has exercised towards the church which meets in his home at Colossae.

Philemon was a wealthy landowner who probably owned a number of slaves. It seems that one of his slaves, Onesimus, has run away from him and has fled to Rome where he has met Paul who is imprisoned there. He has been helping Paul in his ministry. However, even though Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him, he knows that he has to send him back to his master from whom he is estranged.

Although we cannot be totally sure of this it is most likely that the letter which Paul writes to him is an appeal for him to grant Onesimus his freedom.

So the challenge of making a material sacrifice for the sake of following Christ presents itself in two specific ways for Philemon.

First although we may rightly be shocked to think of another human being in terms of a possession early Christianity worked within the accepted economic framework of the institution of slavery.

So in these terms the appeal for Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom amounted to a request for him to give up one of his valuable possessions.

And then also if, as is likely Onesimus has not simply run away from his master Philemon but has stolen money from him, then Philemon would be

entitled to financial restitution. However, Paul appeals to Philemon that rather than seeking to enforce this debt, he should charge this 'to my account'. But what does Paul mean by this? Was the imprisoned Paul in any position himself to make such a payment? Or might he have been thinking more metaphorically in terms of charging the amount that Onesimus owed against the immeasurable spiritual debt which Philemon owed Paul as the person who was responsible for introducing him to the Christian faith?

So Paul is asking Philemon to make significant material sacrifices for the sake of his Christian faith. He tells Philemon that he could simply order Philemon to do this as a matter of Christian duty.

But this is not how Paul wants to work and indeed it is not how Christian faith itself works. Rather than being an expression of duty Paul would like Philemon's generosity to spring from love and an awareness of God's grace. Paul wants Philemon's generosity to be given freely and voluntarily and to have a free choice as to how he will act. He wants the change in Onesimus' status and the relinquishing of any legal claims which Philemon might have to be a voluntary action and not one which is forced.

Paul concludes with confidence that Philemon will voluntarily do what he asks. He speaks about Philemon owing him his very self. This no doubt refers to Paul's involvement in introducing Philemon to the grace of Christ. It is as grace works more and more deeply in our lives that we ourselves come to mirror this through generosity towards others. For when we extend grace to others this is simply a reflection of the much greater grace which Christ has already shown to us.

So what is undoubtedly true is that the Christian life is one both of sacrifice and generosity even if the details of this are for us to work out. We need to be willing to give up our possessions and this may at times be translated into a specific call from God to give up a specific valued possession. Giving

God a 'blank cheque' in this way means that we cannot control the times and occasions on which this call may come to us. But what is important is that when the call does come we are ready and prepared for it. Jesus calls us to count the cost of discipleship. Have we truly done this?

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- Generosity and an openness to Christ's sacrificial call
- New Prime Minister in office next week
- Forecast of economic crisis
- Climate emergency
- Conflict between Russia and the Ukraine
- Those whom we know who are facing illnesses of all kinds and have recently been bereaved
- For the Deanery in considering Pastoral Reorganisation
- For Elliscombe House in Higher Holton now reopened and for its first residents
- For refreshment for teachers, children and parents of North Cadbury church school and other local schools in their school holidays
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Hymn

One hymn chosen for this morning is 'For the beauty of the earth.'

Services for next week

Sunday 11th September

9.30 am Communion, Galhampton

Sunday 11 th September	9.30 am Communion, North Cheriton
Sunday 11 th September	9.30 am Matins, Blackford
Sunday 11 th September	11.00 am Sunday Worship, Holton

Excalibur

Excalibur is back in paper form. It contains details of Camelot people, a record of baptisms, weddings and funerals undertaken through the church in the Camelot Parishes. The September edition of Excalibur has now been published online at camelotparishes.co.uk.

The Parish Office

If Rob is not in the Office during normal office hours please contact him via email (office@camelotparishes.org.uk) or on 01749 850934.

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)