

Susan Cresswell's sermon for 7th September



A prisoner of war dog tag

** in bag.... A family tree ornament, father's prisoner of war dog tag, hand written letter imagining what Paul may have written to send with my dad.*

No real choice for me this time with readings. It had to be Philemon. Why, you may ask? (*Get out family tree*). This is my recent family, but back in late 1700s in S. John's parish church was married a forebear of mine by the name of Onesimus. We will find out about his bible namesake later.

Let's have a think about the gospel first. Some teachings of the Bible are hard. We mustn't brush them away. We need to think what they mean to us to grow in faith. "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions". Over the centuries some exceptional characters have risen to the challenge, but what does it mean to us? Does 'give up' really mean that? Or can we fulfil our mission by not relying on the social norms or our possessions – yet using ourselves and what we have in God's service? Each of us must seek God's guidance and look to Jesus to help this journey of faith. We must trust him to make it clear to us if anything is standing in the way of full commitment. Social norms are important for us to live our lives in society with others. But we must look to see if they are in agreement with our faith or hinder our deepening closeness to Father God.

So, we come to the story of Onesimus. I've already touched on this, but it is really important in our pilgrimage of faith that we grow by questioning, thinking, reading, and studying. It's good to challenge ourselves with new ideas, constantly checking if the way we lead our life is in line with our faith. The popular idea of Onesimus is that he was a runaway slave. That's just what I thought until I read for today. Like a lot in the Bible, it's open to different interpretation.

This letter reads like a novel, and how we want to know what went on before and after! Paul uses Greek word-play a lot and leaves things open to make us think and take things to ourselves. Actually, it doesn't matter what Onesimus's status is, but surely if he were a runaway slave he would be in hiding. By the conventions of ancient slavery, and because Paul is in prison, it's possible he was sent by Philemon to help Paul in prison. In the letter, Onesimus is not presented as remorseful or repentant. Whatever the situation, it appears that when he was with Paul he became a Christian and Paul found a new colleague in ministry. Paul notes his own joy and comfort in Philemon's love because the saints have been 'refreshed' through Philemon. I have read that about the year 110CE when Bishop Ignatius was being taken in chains to Rome he wrote to the Ephesians. Thanking them for 'refreshing' him through Crocus and others that they sent to be with him when he was a prisoner. Paul appeals to Philemon in love, not commanding him. Onesimus – the name means 'useful' in Greek. This may well be Paul using Greek word-play – it may mean before Onesimus was Christian he was useless, but now he is converted he is useful... Paul is saying there has been a change in Onesimus's status. No longer a slave, but a beloved brother.

This is surely a message for us today. By the social norms of his day, Philemon was doing no wrong by having slaves – he was probably a good master, too. Having slaves certainly didn't stop him being baptised and having a church in his house. Didn't stop Paul congratulating him. But here Paul is pushing Philemon to consider whether having Onesimus as a slave is how things should be. He is speaking in love to get his message across.

This is something for us to consider. We have to live in the society around us, but we must live by our faith as well. We have to desire carefully how much we conform to what seems acceptable in society around us. In his day, Jesus threw over so many of the social norms of his time.

We are all aware of the terrible things happening in the world today and may think nothing like that could happen here, however these things never started big, they started small and were allowed to grow into horror.

Luke's story points out that discipleship may be a response to the Grace of God, but it makes demands that shouldn't be taken lightly. Disciples are to 'carry the cross' in the way life is lead. We have Jesus before us leading the way. Today's reading tells us that if we take up discipleship without the personal determination to carry it through, we could end up like the one who started building a watch tower, but hadn't the resources to finish it. How lucky are we to have the love of God helping us on the way.

I've got something else in my little bag. Here it is – my father's prisoner of war dog tag. I never knew of its existence before he died. I wish I had – I would have liked to know why he had kept this symbol of his great suffering. He had to wear it in camps and on the death march. He wore it when he was near to death, and then saved and kept it the rest of his life. How did a society grow to think it was fine to reduce men to a number? How could the social norms be accepted by so many? My guess is, though he never talked much, my dad could have recited that number to his dying day. Through all that he was a man of faith – a faith he never lost and retained all his life. He took great comfort in the Bible and read it early every morning before he went to work.

Let's have a flight of fancy. If Paul had written a letter about my dad, what might he have said?

"I am writing about Richard. He was a prisoner for many years but is now free. Except he is always living with memory. Memories that will sometimes make him difficult. But memories that will always make him stand up for the poor and the vulnerable. That will never let him walk by anybody in trouble on the street. That will make him carry chocolate in his pocket in case he saw someone in trouble. I ask you to love him as a brother, with all his difficulties, as his Father God loves him and you"

(show the family tree again)

So... my friends, off we go, keeping Jesus as our inspiration and measuring stick to judge how we live this life of ours alongside the world as it is.

Amen