

4 September 2022

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14: 25-33

The theme of the proper ordering of family and household relationships seems to link at least part of our two New Testament readings today.

I remember one time when I was a teenager getting into a furious argument with my mother. The funny thing is, I can't now remember what the argument was about. But I do vividly remember that I got extremely angry and frustrated. Red in the face, and with tears welling up in my eyes, I stomped out of the kitchen and down the hall to my bedroom, and I slammed the door. Well, even the door was frustrating because it would stick in the doorframe, so instead of a satisfying "bang" as I slammed it behind me, it lamely went "squeak"!

And in my rage I shouted ... can you guess?

Yes, that's right: "I hate you!"

Have you ever said that to a parent, or brother or sister, or someone close to you?

Have you ever heard it from one of your children?

I think I remember being told as a child that you should never say you hate someone, because to hate someone is to wish that they were dead!

So what's with Jesus saying what we just heard from Luke's gospel?

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

To be a disciple of Jesus, to be a follower of Jesus, we have to hate our parents (and so on)? Is that what Jesus is saying?

When Jesus talks here about hate, he is using an idiom in his native Aramaic to talk about priorities. What he is saying is, if we want to follow him then he needs to come first. If we want to follow Jesus, then no matter how important anyone or anything else is, they must come second.

In the time and area in which the New Testament was written, slaves were common. Most people who were reasonably well off would have slaves: to them, this was as natural as owning a car or television or mobile phone or laptop seems to us today. Most people in those days would wonder how you did anything without slaves: slaves did all kinds of things ranging from the grotty dirty jobs we usually imagine slaves to have done; through to working alongside their owners in trades; all the way through to such things as teaching maths and reading and writing to children, and acting as secretaries to public officials.

The Epistle reading today is most of one of the shortest books in the Bible, and it is a letter written by Paul to someone named Philemon.¹ Paul has been really important to Philemon, helping him to get to know Jesus, teaching him, and helping him to start a little church in his home. In this way Paul could be thought of as Philemon's spiritual father. Philemon could think that he "owes" Paul a lot.

Philemon had a slave called Onesimus, which means "Useful". Useful has run away from Philemon, and after travelling around for a bit, has somehow come across the great Christian leader, Paul. Ironically enough, though, at the time Useful meets Paul, Paul is not free: he is in prison for his preaching about Jesus.

Somewhere along the way Useful has become a Christian too. But right now he is in no particular danger on that score; he is in danger because there are severe penalties for slaves who run away, right up to the possibility of being killed. Useful is scared.

And so now Paul writes to Philemon about his slave, Useful.

At around the same time another letter is written by another important man about another runaway slave. In this second letter the important man is Pliny the Younger. Pliny was a barrister, a senator, a senior public official attaining high civic honours. Pliny writes to someone who "owes" him, Sabinianus, about Sabinianus's former slave who has run away. In those days a good slave might be given his liberty, given the ability to leave his master and seek his fortune elsewhere. Such people were called "freedmen", but they often remained completely dependent on their

¹ The following discussion of the book of Philemon, and of the correspondence of Pliny, relies upon the extensive discussion found in Wright, *Paul*, pp.3-22

former owners for employment and security. We don't know how it has come about, but Sabinianus's freedman has asked Pliny for help. And so Pliny writes to Sabinianus.

The two letters are very similar in many ways; but there are important differences, and the first difference is this: in Pliny's letter, Sabinianus's freedman isn't even mentioned by name. In Pliny's letter, there's no "Onesimus", no "Useful", just "a freedman of yours". A slave was regarded as something owned, almost as if he or she were a *thing*; a freedman may no longer be a slave as such, but he is still close to the bottom of the social pile at the mercy of those above him.

When Pliny writes to Sabinianus, it is to *tell* Sabinianus that he ought to take his man back. He dresses it up in flowery language, "I'm afraid it will look as though I'm putting pressure on you, not simply making a request", but we know that Pliny really *is* putting pressure on Sabinianus. What Pliny is really saying, under the flowery language, is "I'm far more important than you, Sabinianus, and, if you know what's good for you you'll do as I tell you and take this man back."

But when Paul writes to Philemon, it is to *ask* him to take Useful back. And Paul doesn't use the power of his position over Philemon. Instead Paul writes about how they are brothers in Jesus Christ. Even though "Philemon" owes him, Paul takes a lot of trouble to emphasise how they are united; they are family; they are partners in the work of Jesus.

When Sabinianus receives the letter from Pliny, and reads of the instruction dressed up as a polite excuse, his likely reaction will be "I suppose I'd better do as I'm told and take this man back into my service, because otherwise I won't be in Pliny's good books, and that would be a backward step socially. I'd slip down the pecking order a bit, and I don't want that. It might be weak to forgive that good-for-nothing, but that is the necessary cost of keeping my strong position with Pliny."

And as for the unnamed freedman, he will bring the letter to Sabinianus in fear and trembling, and once forgiven will breathe a sigh of relief that he still has his life and

hasn't had to endure severe punishment, and will go back to being the perfectly obedient servant.

In the Pliny, Sabinianus, freedman situation the ending finds everyone exactly where they were beforehand – Pliny on to the top of the pile; Sabinianus in the middle; and the freedman at the bottom. In that society, that was exactly where everyone belonged.

But when Philemon receives a letter from Paul, things are very different. Here there is no instruction, but rather an appeal. And it is an appeal made by one who addresses Philemon as an equal, as a fellow brother in Jesus Christ. When Philemon receives this letter, he is likely to think “If Paul, who is superior to me, thinks of me as a brother, perhaps I can think of Useful as my brother too; and it seems that Paul thinks of Useful as his brother already. Paul asks me to welcome Useful in the same way I'd welcome Paul.”

In fact, Paul goes further still, and says that if there is anything that Useful has to repay for the wrong he has done, Philemon is to put it down on Paul's account. Paul is saying, “Whatever punishment Useful deserves, I'll take it for him.”

And as Useful goes back to Philemon, he too probably goes back in considerable fear and trembling – he doesn't know what Paul has written. He will express his proper sorrow for running away, and will ask “Please allow me to come back without punishment.” But to Useful's wonderment, Philemon, if he fully understands what Paul is on about, will receive Useful back as a lost brother.

And we may also imagine, perhaps, that as a result Philemon might then decide to make Useful a freedman.

But that is not the main point. The main point is that whatever the roles these people go on to have, in Paul's eyes, in Jesus, they are equals.

In the Paul, Philemon, Useful situation the ending finds everyone in *new* places – Paul from the top of the pile is now Philemon's brother; Useful from the bottom of the pile is now lifted up to be brother to Philemon and Paul.

Two letters; two very similar situations. But the results are completely different.

What is the reason for these very different outcomes?

Is it just that Paul is a better man than Pliny?

Is it that Paul is a great social reformer?

No, the reason for these very different outcomes is Jesus.

Paul has come to understand that Jesus was the one sent and appointed by God to be the world's true king. Paul has come to understand that Jesus came to reconcile – to bring back together humans and God; and to bring together people from all races, from all social positions ... yes, even to bring together slaves and masters.

Pliny is caught up in a world built on power structures – with the Roman emperor at the very top, and everyone else carefully lined up in different layers underneath. Keeping people in their proper place was a big part of how that world operated. Pliny is as much a victim of this structure as he is a beneficiary. Pliny may be freer than Sabinianus and much freer than the freedman, but his freedom is limited by those higher up the pecking order – and if he steps out of line, the consequences would be as unbearable for him as they would have been for the freedman if Sabinianus hadn't chosen to take him back.

Paul, on the other hand, has come to recognise that in following Jesus as the world's rightful king he finds true freedom. Paul lived under the authority of Jesus as Lord of all, but discovered that under the reign of Jesus authority is suddenly something to be received with joy because it is exercised in perfect love and grace for all – no matter what their social standing.

At the end of the story, after the two different letters are delivered and acted upon, Pliny, Sabinianus and the slave are just as trapped as they were before and remain separated by class divisions; but Paul, Philemon, and Useful are set free to be one with one another. This is the work of Jesus.

Both Paul and Pliny lived within the power structure of the Roman empire. But there is a world of difference between them. At the heart of the difference between Paul

and Pliny is a difference of *master*. Paul, the Jew, whose worldview has always included the narrative whereby the living God overthrew the tyrant of Egypt and freed his enslaved people, had come to believe that this great story had reached its God-ordained climax in the arrival of Israel's Messiah; the Messiah who was expected to be the true Lord of the entire world. In being faithful to his people, God had been faithful to the whole creation. Paul lived under the authority of this "lord", this Messiah, and devoted himself to making that authority effective in the lives of the communities that had come to share that same faith. Because, however, this Messiah and "lord" was the crucified and risen Jesus, Paul understood everything differently² – including his own position, and his relationships with others. Paul told Philemon to put any losses incurred down to his account: in doing so he was following the model of his master, Jesus, who pays Paul's account, and ours too, in full.

So finally when we come to the demand of discipleship, of total obedience and submission, in Luke 14 we do well to remember that this costly road is demanded by the one who gave his all, his life, for us.

The proper ordering of all family, household, and social relationships – indeed, the proper ordering of everything – is found in submission to God, and to his Son, Jesus Christ. And it is in this submission that we at last find our perfect freedom.

Sources:

- D Mark Davis, "Holy Hating" <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.co.nz/2013/09/holy-hating.html>
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- Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001/2004
- Jennifer Pietz, "Commentary on Philemon 1:1-21", https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4176

² This paragraph quotes freely from Wright, *Paul*, p.22