

Sunday.23

Last Saturday I attended a party a son gave to his parents on their sixtieth wedding anniversary. It was like a wedding: over a hundred guests, at an exclusive club, a full meal and open bar. The son had worked at preparing it for months, and he was repaid handsomely, he felt, when his mother leaned over to him at dinner, gave him a big kiss, and said, “I love you so much.”

One of the highlights of this party, at least for me, was the fact that the wedding itself, in 1950, has been filmed. Today we often see slides or video tapes of past events, but this film was even more alive because the people in it were moving. If we could have heard them talking, it would have been just like being there. There they were: the bride and groom, now 82, but then 22, with their parents and their wedding party, and different shots of the beautifully set tables and the beautiful garden setting. Watching it could make you forget the distance of sixty years. You could imagine that you were there.

We could have a similar feeling about today’s second reading, St. Paul’s Letter to Philemon, because this is the only letter we have written by Paul to an individual. All his other letters were written

to communities. Three other letters attributed to him and written to Timothy and Titus, individuals, are not considered to be from his own hand but later works written by other people who wished to imitate Paul and be seen as his disciples. But no one doubts that this little letter is from the man himself. And so we can eavesdrop on this personal conversation and imagine ourselves as being almost a part of it. In that sense it is like watching the 16 milometer film of that 1950 wedding.

Paul describes himself here as an old man and in prison. He is writing to a fellow Christian by the name of Philemon who must have been fairly well-off because he owned a slave by the name of Onesimus. But Onesimus is no longer with his master Philemon. Perhaps he had run away. In any case, Paul has met Onesimus in prison and has become his good friend. Indeed he calls himself Onesimus' father. Perhaps Paul means he is Onesimus' father in the faith, for Onesimus has become a Christian.

Although Paul would like to keep Onesimus with himself because he could help him in preaching the Gospel, he feels obliged to send him back to Philemon, his rightful owner. And now he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back into his household not simply as a slave, perhaps even a run-away slave, but as his brother in

Christ. Indeed, Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as if he were Paul himself.

So we are listening to a conversation between two people, Paul and Philemon, both Christians, about a third person, Onesimus, also a Christian and also the slave of Philemon, and we learn that the slave who has become a Christian should now be treated by his owner as a brother in Christ.

Why didn't Paul go a step further and tell Philemon that he should free Onesimus? In other words, if Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus as his brother in Christ, why doesn't he ask him to free him? Wouldn't that make sense? For how can the same person be both a brother and a slave? But apparently Paul did not see it that way. The fact that he sends Onesimus back to Philemon means that he is acknowledging Philemon's ownership of him.

For some of us this is difficult to understand. But, in defense of Paul, perhaps we could say that he thought that the bond of Christian faith now existing between the owner and slave overrode any social difference. Brotherhood in faith was more important than the owner-slave relationship. The latter would be observed because that is how society then functioned, but on a deeper level,

on the level of Christian faith, Philemon and Onesimus would now recognize themselves as brothers in the Lord.

Paul's acceptance of this duality, the coexistence of slavery and brotherhood in faith in the same relationship, was followed by Christians up until a hundred and fifty years ago. Washington and Jefferson had slaves, though their consciences were not easy about this fact. It is only within the last three or four generations that we have come to see a profound discrepancy between being Christian and owning another person.

One lesson we can learn here is that we are very limited in our understanding of things, even, and perhaps most especially, in our understanding of our faith and its implications for our daily living. As the first reading for today told us, there is no wisdom among humans unless it is given from above, from the Holy Spirit. Left to our own wisdom we are blind. When future Christians look back at us, what will they see which we did not see about our lives as Christians? What discrepancies between our faith and our lives will they see which we do not see today? And since that is the case, we must do two things. First, we must ask for wisdom to see more clearly. Secondly, we must walk more humbly, knowing that in many ways our vision of our faith is very limited.