

23rd Sunday .07

1. Today's second reading is from a letter which St. Paul wrote to a man named Philemon, whom Paul had brought to the faith.

Philemon is now a member of the Christian community in the city of Colossae, a city on the west coast of Turkey. Paul is writing from prison, but scholars are not sure which prison. He could have been writing from Rome where he was imprisoned between 61 and 63, or he could have been writing a few years earlier from a prison in Ephesus, a city also on the west coast of Turkey not too far from Colossae.

2. Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of another man named Onesimus. So what we are reading here is a letter of recommendation. Paul is recommending Onesimus to Philemon. But why? Because he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. And why is he sending him back to Philemon? Because Onesimus is Philemon's run-away slave. He may have run away because he did something wrong. For in vs 18 Paul writes to Philemon: "...if he has done you any injustice or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I will pay."

3. Since running away from his master, Onesimus has met Paul and become a convert to Christianity and has even helped Paul in his work as a preacher of the Gospel. Indeed, Paul would like to keep Onesimus as his helper, but he does not think that would be right. No, he believes that Onesimus should return to his master. But Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus not simply as his slave but also as his brother in Christ. “Welcome him as you would welcome me,” he writes Philemon.

4. This request may seem rather harmless to us, but its implications for the society in which Philemon and Onesimus lived were revolutionary. Slaves in the Roman world were the property of their masters who exercised the power of life and death over them. A slave had no rights. A writer of the first century AD named Pliny tells the story of a man who punished his slave for dropping a glass goblet by having him thrown into a pond where lampreys tore him to pieces. This fact was recently portrayed in a recent series on television about ancient life in Rome, although in this portrayal the emperor Augustus was the guest at the man’s house and prevented him from disposing of his slave in this cruel way, indeed ordered the pond to be filled in so that his host would no longer have the opportunity to be so cruel.

5. Scripture scholars point out to us that Paul does not attack the system of slavery in itself. On the contrary, he respects Philemon's ownership of Onesimus by sending him back to him. But how should we say this? He relativizes the system. He undercuts it. He defangs it. He includes it in a larger web of relationship, that of Christians with one another, and in this new web there is for Paul neither slave nor free, for all are one in Christ as members of his body. Thus the equality which members of the faith community have with each other undercuts, envelopes and goes beyond the relationship of master-slave. And yet Paul's insight did not change the system of slavery itself. In other words, we can imagine that when Onesimus went back to Philemon's house, their personal and private relationship was now different because they recognized each other as brothers in the Lord. But structurally Onesimus remained Philemon's slave.

6. Neither Paul nor Christians of later times attacked slavery as a social-political system. It was not challenged in our country until the Civil War took place in the 1860s. And it remains in existence today in many parts of the world even though the word itself, slavery, may not be used. Employers in mines in many parts of the world live and work as slaves. Indeed many workers in our own

country live in slave-like conditions. They are brought here under false pretenses, promised everything by sponsors. But once here they live as the slaves of those who brought them here, at times confined in prison-like conditions. And we have all ready of the sex slaves, sometimes mere children, who exist everywhere in our world.

7. What can we learn from this? At least two things. First, that many times it takes us centuries to draw the implications of our faith, of what it demands of us, of what it frees us to do, of what it obliges us to do. Today we would say that for one person to own another is a violation of the sacredness of the human person, that a person cannot be owned, that things can be owned, but not people. That insight is present in an obscure and beginning way in Paul's argument. But it took centuries for society and the church to grasp the social and political implications of this insight. Secondly, this teaches us that left to ourselves we are blind. We need help to see the implications of our faith. Our first reading today speaks of the frailty of human deliberations, of the weakness of our minds to understand what is good and true and wise. It tells us that we cannot be wise left to our own devices. We need to be enlightened from above. We need the Holy Spirit if we are to see, if we are to

be wise. That is all too evident in the history of slavery existing within Christian communities.

8. Where are the blind spots in our personal lives today? Where are the blind spots in our church today? Where are the blind spots in our society today? They are there, but we don't see them. We need to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that we may see. And so we pray: Lord, help us to see our lives as you see them, and then help us to change them. Lord, help us as a church to see ourselves as you see us, and helps us to change. Lord, help us to see our society as you see it, and then help us to change it. Amen.