Sunday 26th September 2021 - Philemon – Accountability

How often have you had a sermon on Philemon? Not particularly a weighty book. In fact, a short letter.

Written to an individual from Paul. The individual – Philemon, a converted Christian living in Colosse. A slave owner.

One of his slaves stole from him and ran away.

How relevant is it to us? Any slave owners in today? What is it doing in the bible? Must have some relevance in the message.

Speaks of a few things. Firstly, forgiveness. Slave who stole was punishable by death under Roman law.

Paul asking for Philemon to take him back. But further than that. Accept him as a brother!

What about whatever had been stolen? Paul offers to recompense for anything lost.

Paul offers to stand in the gap to make good the chasm, the barrier that Onesimus could not pay.

Reminded of the good Samaritan who said to the innkeeper, charge any costs to me.

Reflects Christ – stands in the gap for each of us so that no barrier between us and God.

Paul had become friend to Onesimus, which means useful. He was only asking for Philemon to do what he had already done. Gained his trust. Knew Onesimus was repentant.

Have you ever thought how radical this request would have been? Accept a slave as a friend, as an equal? Social justice even in those times.

How do we look at people around us?

Story of a man who wanted to celebrate his wedding anniversary, wanted to make it special. Posh frocks and men in evening suits. One person did not own an evening suit and did not want to go to the bother and expense of hiring one. Remarked “the guy is only a fork-lift truck operator”.

On the basis of the letter to Philemon and how he was appealing for Onesimus to be accepted, I would suggest that Paul would have offered to purchase an evening suit. Perhaps even have some delivered to the man to try on so no bother even going to a shop!

Paul is asking that this slave, who has done wrong, is made to feel whole again, accepted completely, and given a new start.

Are we prepared to lift others, despite their history and past?

Jesus died so that we are equal before God. Each of us is washed clean, just as everyone around us either has been, or can be. We are all children of God, which is such a special thing – but because God has equal compassion and mercy for everyone, it is actually quite ordinary.

Second message – accountability of social action.

Paul states that he could order Philemon to do as he asks. But it is a much greater witness if someone willingly does the right thing.

Comes from the heart – a true witness to character of God.

As followers of Christ, we are called to live differently, to value everyone, even those who community would ignore quite happily. We are called to social action.

Paul in this letter is showing how church family should hold each other accountable.

Letter was personal, to Philemon. Did not say “private and confidential”.

With greetings to others in the church who met in Philemon’s home, and signed off from those who were with Paul, it was intended to be read out at church meeting.

Could be construed as a tactical manipulation? But we know that Paul had written about doing all things with love at the centre.

Walking together – like promises made at induction service.

This letter written to Philemon reflects radical, social justice from Christians, still relevant today.

Jesus died for everyone. And when anyone accepts that relationship that is offered with our Father in heaven, there is mighty celebration and rejoicing in heaven.

Is there anyone who, when you think you may meet them in heaven, does not seem to sit well with you? If they have – or if they do in the future – accept God, then would you rejoice?