Pentecost XIII   8 September, 2019

A Homily reached by Lay Preacher, David Lindley at St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

A. Paul's letter to Philemon - a prototypical story of forgiveness and reconciliation -reveals his use of soft power, the power of diplomatic language

Seeking to convince a slave owner - PHILEMON- to grant a runaway slave - ONESIMUS - who may have stolen from PHILEMON - his freedom

Seeking a societally unfathomable outcome for a runaway slave - an outcome possible through Christ

Seeks to avoid embarrassment to Philemon who was being asked to forgive and forget what contemporaneous society condemned

Gentle language in a public place - the letter read to a small family based congregation (church which met in Philemon's house)

I. VOLITIONAL.

NOT COMMANDING Philemon "to do [his] duty" - "though bold enough in Christ" - had the power to do so

but "appealing to [Philemon] on the basis of love"

As an "old man" and as a "prisoner of Christ Jesus"

Paul Sending Onesimus VOLUNTARILY back to Philemon

II. Paul's relationship with ONESIMUS and with Philemon was FAMILIAL

'My child" "whose father I have become" while in prison

Formerly USELESS to [Philemon] [presumably as a child] but not now USEFUL to both [Philemon] and [Paul] as an adult

[Equates ONESIMUS to "my own heart" ?]

Wanted to keep ONESIMUS to help him in prison as ONESIMUS might have been had he been there
Onesimus was More than a slave but as a Beloved Brother to both Paul and even more so to Philemon

In the Flesh and in the Lord

III. CONSENSUAL. Wants Philemon's consent for Onesimus' return and forgiveness

IV PLEASURE IN RELIEF OF PAIN. The pain of Separation necessary precursor to joy of a

return.

No longer as a slave
But more than a slave as a BELOVED BROTHER

V. Paul as GUARANTOR of Onesimus' obligations to Philemon "owing me even your own soul"

If Onesimus owes anything (presumably theft, advances to slave, costs to support a slave, manumission costs) to Philemon Paul will pay it

"Charge that to my account"
"I will repay it"

Repayment promise suggests that Paul thought his imprisonment only temporary as did his request that Philemon "prepare a room"

V. Compare the tone of Paul's letter with the tone of today's Gospel from Luke

To be a disciple: "must hate" family

To be a disciple : must " carry the cross"

To be a disciple : one cannot figure out costs first - building, war

To be a disciple : one must give up all one's possessions

Nothing diplomatic in Luke's guidance as to what it takes to be a disciple. Advancing Christianity requires self-denial.

But In Denial the Gospel recognizes the importance of Family, Financial analysis and Possessions to non-disciples;

separates those who are disciples from the rest

Tone differs but similar focus

B. In summary Paul uses:

Flattery

Participation of Philemon in the outcome - his consent was solicited

Shared values and interest with Philemon

Burden sharing - Onesimus taking a burden otherwise fall on Philemon
Describes as Paul's Partner by Paul

Yet Paul claimed the power to compel: three times says Philemon owes him obedience - appeal basis of love not command; to do nothing without your consent - voluntary, not forced; and

owing me even your own self - but prefer consent [tighten language]

C. What does Paul's letter reveal about his attitude toward slavery

No moral criticism of this harsh economic reality of those times but his actions if followed would subvert slavery as an institution:

Seeks MANUMISSION of Onesimus by Philemon - with or without payment
Seeks a morally good outcome through Christian love
An outcome Which was good for not only the slave but also the slave owner
Benefit Philemon in the Lord

Agrees to ASSUME any financial obligations Onesimus had to Philemon- restitution to the slave owner

Soft solution to slavery made possible by Paul, Onesimus and Philemon ALL Following Christ

Christianity IS THE solution FOR SLAVERY
Following Christ did not require a polemical attack on slavery

A Christian solution: Love, forgiveness and reconciliation