

Thought for 28th February 2021

This week we are continuing our journey through Paul's letter to Philemon. As we saw last week this short personal letter helps us to answer some difficult questions we have about our Christian life. Firstly, it answers the question "who are my fellow believers to me?" and secondly it answers the question "where do I fit in to all that is going on?"

So, let's have a quick recap. Paul wrote this letter on behalf of a runaway slave, Onesimus to his master Philemon whilst under house arrest in Rome in. Onesimus meet Paul after he had fled to Rome. Paul led Onesimus to Jesus and they became close, working together to share the Gospel in Rome. Despite Onesimus's usefulness to Paul and his deep affection for him Paul decided that the best course of action was to send Onesimus back to Philemon and resolve the situation. Paul sent Onesimus back with this letter appealing to Philemon to treat Onesimus not as he deserved under Roman law but in a very different way.

Pauls appeal was based on the fact that Onesimus had become a believer like Paul and Philemon and that their shared faith meant Philemon could not just treat Onesimus as a runaway slave. Paul appealed was based on three great truths of the Jesus teachings and the Gospel that Philemon, Paul and Onesimus worked so hard to share.

Firstly, Paul appealed to Philemon as a brother in Christ of Onesimus and therefore even though Onesimus had sinned against him he should forgive in the same manner that he would forgive his brother.

Secondly, Paul appealed to Philemon to treat Onesimus as a man not a slave. Paul encouraged Philemon to value Onesimus in the same manner as God valued Onesimus. To see Onesimus as God saw him, as a dearly beloved son whom God sacrificed His all for.

Thirdly, Paul asked Philemon to act in love. Here Pauls appeal is not that Philemon has warm feelings for Onesimus no Paul is asking something radical of Philemon. Christian love is clearly defined by Jesus in **John 15: 12 - 13** "*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down*

one's life for one's friends.” Christian love for each other is seen in their serving each other. Paul is asking the slave master to serve the slave. Stop think about it Paul is challenging Philemon to turn Roman society on it's head, to break every social convention to forgive Onesimus as a brother, to value him as God does and to serve Onesimus.

Last week I said that we would think further about Pauls appeal to Philemon to treat Onesimus as family and what exactly this family of God looks like. As we think about what the family of God looks like it will answer our second question, “where do I fit in to all that is going on?” Pauls uses koinonia to describe what it means to be family. In his letter he uses koinonia to describe how he, Philemon and Onesimus and partners or family members working together to share the Gospel.

However, koinonia expresses a much richer and broader vision of what it means to be part of the family of God, brothers and sisters in Jesus. So, let take a look how koinonia is used and what it teaches us about being in God's family.

In the Bible, koinonia is more than friendship. It is a divinely intimate, holy unity among believers—and between believers and the Lord—involving everything from spiritual oneness in the Holy Spirit, community life, sharing their material abundance and the communion partaken in the body and blood of Christ Jesus. The Book of Acts is the first place we see the word koinonia in the Bible. Here, it is translated to mean a deep community fellowship among believers.

In Acts 2, Peter and the other believers had just been filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, but the Jews watching were bewildered at the disciples' ability to speak in many different languages; some even thought they were drunk. But Peter brought the gospel to these onlookers, and 3,000 became new believers and were baptized that day. After, these newly baptized believers “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and to prayer”.

The passage goes on to elaborate about what this koinonia looked like: communal-style living, where they “had everything in common,” sold property to give to anyone in need, gathered regularly in the temple courts, and ate together joyfully in their

homes. Later, when Gentiles began to hear the Good News and also became believers, we see the concept of koinonia used to include them, too. Back then, Jews and Gentiles did not intermingle and thought poorly of each other. But Christ at work in them through the power of the Holy Spirit allowed these separate groups to dissolve their former boundaries and become as one—true koinonia.

As the apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Ephesus, God had a secret plan, a “mystery,” of unity for these very different people. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6).

Koinonia also includes the many-become-one concept reflected in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the Last Supper, Jesus offered bread as his own body, “given for you,” and then his blood in the wine, calling it “the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20). Later, the apostle Paul reminds early Christians that this act, too, is a part of koinonia, as those who partake are one body all sharing one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:17).

And it’s not just the sharing of food. Koinonia applies also to the sharing of financial gifts. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, generosity applies both to the spiritual and the material. Their financial generosity not only helps the community with physical needs but also serves as evidence that helps draw others into the family of God.

The heart of the gospel is that Jesus is the path to eternal life, and that if we repent and believe, we should follow Him and obey His commands. And as Jesus told us in Matthew 22:37-39, those commands are first to love God and second to love our neighbours as ourselves. When we love others as ourselves, it’s a joining, a uniting, a partnership. It says in effect that we are all in this together, or as the apostle Paul used as an analogy, all part of one body.

As Paul wrote, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ ... there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every

part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:21,25-27)

Christians don't need to live in a communal home in order to live out koinonia today, but it's far more than chatting over coffee and cake after worship. It's modelling the love Jesus extended to us. As Jesus told the disciples, "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" We can serve each other with our spiritual gifts as a form of love, and we can also offer more practical, concrete love.

Serving each other with our spiritual gifts is one keyway we can be the full body of Christ today. As Peter wrote, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). Paul expanded on this, noting, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully" (Romans 12:6-8).

Each of you has been given a spiritual gift from God, whether you like it or not. The question is, will you use your spiritual gift to serve God and your brothers and sisters in Christ or will not?

So, what should the family of God look like? Well, the family of God should look very different from society. The family of God should look very different from a social club or any other club. The family of God should be a living breathing testament to the world, a challenge to the emptiness of modern society and a witness to Jesus.

"Where do you fit in to all that is going on?" Well in exactly the same manner everybody else in the family does by loving and being loved, by valuing and being valued and by serving and being served. Perhaps most importantly by forgiving when your brothers and sisters get it wrong and being forgiven by your brothers and sisters when you get it wrong.

“Where do you fit in to all that is going on?” Well you like Paul, Philemon and Onesimus are labouring with your brother and sisters to share the Gospel of hope, the Good News of Jesus.