

*Seeing as*

How do we begin to change the world? How can we be hopeful of changing things, so that we can be confident about the future of our planet and our race? In today's service we have had a focus on our children and young people, and we can't help wondering what future lies in store for them, given some of the threats and dangers that press in upon us. Is change even possible, or are we condemned to repeating the same old mistakes over and over again?

Well, these are big questions, but they are precisely the kind of questions that we address in church and in our worship and I would suggest that the issue of change is one that arises from this short letter written by a man called Paul to a slave owner called Philemon somewhere in the Roman empire two thousand years ago.

To recap the situation: Paul is writing from prison, probably in Ephesus. Enter Onesimus, a slave fleeing his master, a man named Philemon, and Onesimus has found his way to Paul. Now, slavery in the ancient Roman world was not what we associate with the horrors of cotton plantations in the new world, and indeed in some cases it gave security and protection to people from poverty and destitution. Trying to escape from slavery, however, was a very serious matter, and if that is what Onesimus was doing then he risked being branded or even executed in some dreadful manner if caught. Alternatively, it might be that Onesimus was not trying to escape at all. It may be that he had done something wrong and was facing punishment by Philemon and he was fleeing to Paul in the hope that Paul would intercede and plead for him. So the question is, if Paul returns Onesimus, how can he ensure that Philemon will be forgiving towards him? How does he persuade Philemon to take this slave back and not punish him? Indeed we might go further and ask how Paul might persuade Philemon to set Onesimus free altogether, to liberate him from slavery?

Well, the crucial thing here is another factor in the situation. Philemon is a Christian and it seems that while Onesimus has been with Paul he has been converted too. Indeed it seems that both Philemon and Onesimus owe their faith to Paul and that adds a significant ingredient to the situation. Paul recognises that Philemon's father in the faith he has some leverage with him, that he can use strong-arm tactics and put pressure on Philemon to be kind to his slave. Paul, however, does not go down that route. Instead he pleads with Philemon take

Onesimus back, in the words of verse 16, ‘no longer as a slave but as more than a slave – as a beloved brother.’ In other Paul is inviting Philemon to look at Onesimus differently, to see him in a new light, to re-envision him – no longer slave but as a brother.

So what is Paul saying? In what sense is Onesimus Philemon’s brother? Well, what Paul is saying to Philemon in effect is, ‘up until now you have view Onesimus as your slave, right? But now something crucial has happened. By becoming Christians you have both been adopted into God’s family, the family God’s special people. And that means that you can no longer regard each other the same way. Now you must regard each other as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son.’ In other words Paul is prompting Philemon to see thin a new way. He is changing the entire terms of engagement by reinterpreting the situation, helping Philemon to see it differently. And only that will finally have power to make Philemon do what is right. You might say that everything comes down to seeing ‘as’ – no longer seeing someone as a slave, but seeing them as a brother. And to do that is to step into a whole new world.

You see, this is the glory of our Christian faith – it enables us to re-envision the world, to view it differently when we see it through the strange but clear eye of Jesus Christ. Then everything changes. We no longer see another human being just a pile of atoms. We see him or her as creation of God, adorned with God’s image and, more than that, as someone with whom we are united as beloved brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. And so we treat them differently. And this is how real change happens. Not with threats and strong-arm tactics. We start to look differently when we see the world differently.

Onesimus’ name, meaning ‘useful’, reminds me of a story of an old wandering scholar called Muretus who lived centuries ago and who despite being brilliant and multi-lingual became desperately poor and destitute. One day he knocked on the door of a monastery and asked for shelter. ‘What shall we do with this worthless fellow?’ asked one of the monks in Latin, thinking that this old vagabond would not understand what he was saying. But Muretus, the scholar, understood perfectly and replied in Latin, ‘call no-one worthless for whom Christ died!’ Muretus was challenging the monks to reimagine people, to re-envision them in the light of Jesus Christ – as Paul is doing with Philemon.

In a little while we will engage in the supreme Christian act of imagination. Here at the table we see bread *as* the body of Christ and wine *as* Christ’s blood. In other words we reimagine these common elements as the very presence of Christ.

here in our midst. As we do so the old familiar world is reconfigured and re-envisioned and there is hope of change. Amen.