

Paul's subversive gospel

If you happen to be British, or if you have been following the tortuous process of Brexit in recent weeks, you will have observed something all too clearly: negotiation between parties where there are deep differences is very difficult. Where parties are at odds with one another it requires great skill, and wisdom, sometimes great sensitivity and even great cunning to come to agreement. And what a good week to turn to a text where we find... well, exactly that: parties, deeply divided and an attempt at negotiation.

The situation is not entirely clear but it seems to go something like this: I am 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, 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 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 Paul 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, crucially, there 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 is father-in-law to both Philemon and Onesimus and that gives Paul some leverage.

Well, it seems that in this scenario, Paul has two options. One is to pressurise Philemon. He can lay some kind of guilt trip upon Philemon and effectively try to force him to do what he should. Or alternatively he can appeal to Philemon's better nature, and it seems clear that Paul is opting for the latter. Paul says in verse 8, 'For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.' In other

words Paul is saying, ‘I could dictate to you what you ought to do and where your duty lies, but I would rather appeal with love and grace to your own better instincts.’ Again, in verse 13 Paul tells Philemon that he was tempted not to send Onesimus back to him but to keep him for himself, but, as he goes on, ‘I prefer to do nothing without your consent.’ Paul is handling Philemon gently. In fact the whole letter is a master-class in tact. Where Paul could cajole he prefers to tread softly and to endear so that Philemon does the right thing willingly and freely. And there are surely lessons there for us.

Along, however, with endearment and tact, I would suggest that Paul has another, more crucial strategy for getting Philemon to do the right thing and this is where we really get to the heart of the matter. I would suggest to you in fact that what Paul is doing here is nothing less than subverting and undermining the whole practice of slavery – and here we must turn to possibly the most important verse in the whole letter. Listen again to part of verse 15, where Paul talks of Philemon receiving Onesimus back ‘... no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave: a beloved brother...’ Now let’s get this: Paul’s strategy here is to get Philemon to view Onesimus in a completely different light. What Paul is saying to Philemon in effect is, ‘up until now you have viewed Onesimus as your slave, right? But now something crucial has happened. By becoming Christians you have both become members of God’s family, the family of God’s special people. And that means that no longer can you regard each other in terms of slave and master. Now you must regard each other as brothers.’ Paul is prompting Philemon to see this whole situation in a new way, in the light of Christ. He is changing the whole terms of engagement, helping Philemon to view Onesimus differently. And only that will finally have the power to make Philemon do what is right.

You see, one obvious question that has to be asked about this whole scenario is, ‘why did Paul not just speak out against slavery, unequivocally. Why did he not just say, ‘slavery is wrong. Set Onesimus free. End of story.’ That would have made things so much clearer. Abolitionists in the 18th and 19th centuries would have had a much easier job if Paul had just come out clearly and renounced this inhuman practice. Why was it that supporters of slavery were able to appeal to the New Testament and to Paul in particular?

Well, perhaps we have to recognise that slavery was such an integral part of the ancient world that Paul had no power to eradicate it. It would have been trying to do too much too quickly. Instead he subtly and cunningly subverted it. And he did this by showing people how everything had changed with the coming

Christ, such that masters and slaves were now to view each other as brothers and sisters. Paul writes elsewhere, ‘if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation’ and this is a prime example of that new creation. With Christ the old order is subverted as we learn to see the world and to see one another afresh - in the light of Christ.

Indeed, we could think of another example of this subversion of the old order, where Paul talks about the submission of women to men, especially in his letter to the Ephesians. Now, some people think that Paul was sexist and oppressive in this area, down on women, reinforcing of old hierarchies, instructing women to submit to men. But not at all. Paul is far more subtle than that. Instead he argues that with the coming of Christ - the coming of Christ as a servant - the whole nature of submission has changed. Submission has been re-envisioned in Christ. And in fact men and women must now both learn what it means to submit to one another - men to women as well as women to men. With the coming of Christ the whole terms of engagement between the sexes have changed and reconfigured and the protocols of patriarchy have been blown away. In Christ there is a new world, and the old is subverted.

Let me put this starkly. How on earth do we change the world? How do we change our own behaviour? How do we learn to do the right thing? I mean, here we are in this violent world that seems hell-bent on self-destruction and we yearn for peace and we yearn for justice. But deep and lasting change comes not from force and it does not even come ultimately from appeals to our better nature. It will only come when we learn to see the world differently, to reimagine it in the light of Christ.

I’m reminded of that story of the old wandering scholar called Muretus who lived centuries ago and who despite being brilliant and multi-lingual became desperately poor and destitute and 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, ‘no-one worthless for whom Christ died!’ Call no-one worthless for whom Christ died! Muretus was challenging the monks to reimagine people, to re-envision them in terms of the value Christ’s death puts upon them. And centuries later, in the 18th century, when arguments over slavery were raging in Great Britain the great industrialist and potter Josiah Wedgwood mass-produced his anti-slavery medallion, which featured a slave in chains with the words, ‘Am I not a man and

brother?’ Here are echoes of Paul to Philemon, challenging us to view the world differently, to reinterpret and to reimagine it in the light of Christ.

I love a story that John Bell of the Iona Community tells of a group of children who were playing a game of funerals one day. And they had a funeral procession and two kids at the front were the horses and four kids were pall-bearers carrying another one who was the corpse, and they were processing along and someone came up and asked what they were doing. ‘We’re a funeral procession’ kids replied, and the person turned to one of the kids who was a horse and said, ‘who’s died?’ ‘I dunno’, replied the child. ‘I’m only a horse!’ Brilliant! In the context of the drama they were playing out that child could only view the world through the eyes of a horse, so certain things made sense and other things did not. And it’s the same with us. We are part of this great drama of salvation. And we view the world through the eyes of our faith and suddenly slavery and a host of other things no longer make sense, and God give us the childlike gift of imagining the world differently. God help us to reimagine the world as a new creation where we become brothers and sisters to one another, and where no-one is worthless for whom Christ died and where we no longer lord it over one another but we learn what submission and deference to one another mean.

We might wish that Paul had been a bit more direct and forceful about slavery. We might regret that it took so long for Christians to campaign for its eradication. Yet the seeds of abolition are here, in this challenge of Paul to Philemon, to see Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. And that is not just a simplistic belief that we are all God’s children and so we should be nice to each other. That is bland and banal. This is something more radical. This is to suggest that with the coming of Christ the entire edifice of the world has been shaken, the power dynamics by which the world operates have been overthrown. A new way of seeing one another, a new way of relating to one another is possible. And that is the key to the eradication of all forms of slavery, ancient and contemporary, and a host of other evils that beset our world. Amen.