

Every so often I disappear to take a service in another church. It's something self-supporting ministers and retired clergy do quite a lot; even more so if you happen to have the Area Dean as your vicar. We've been described as 'ecclesiastical Polyfills' – we fill in the cracks. Anyway, occasionally when I am elsewhere something happens which finds me struggling to keep a straight face (which would never, of course, happen at St Peter's). Today's second reading reminded me of one of those occasions. There I was, front and centre, in full view of everyone, listening to the letter to Philemon being read, and up popped a character called One-simus. Logically, of course, there's nothing to indicate that he shouldn't be called One-simus, and if you're reading the text for the first time it's a perfectly reasonable way to pronounce his name. But it did make me want to laugh, because it was so unexpected.

Onesimus is a Greek word. It means 'useful', and it is an example of the names given to slaves by their owners. It wasn't just a first century practice – West Indian and American slaves were still being given similar names – and thus deprived of their identities – in the nineteenth century. This young man, whom Paul describes as a child, is the reason why Paul is writing to Philemon, and the fact that he is a slave is why Paul is treading rather carefully. Onesimus has run away from his owner, and not only run away but apparently robbed him in the process, which is why Paul offers to repay anything that has been lost. A slave was a chattel – property – and the slave-owner was entitled to do whatever he liked with his property (though it was advisable to be a little careful. Your slaves did all the work in the fields, with the animals and in the house; you needed them healthy and fit for work.) Slaves were forced to follow their owner's religious practices. Philemon was a Christian so Onesimus would have experienced regular Christian worship.

Not only would a runaway slave be severely punished if returned to his master, but anyone who helped a slave to escape or gave him food or shelter could also be punished. So Paul himself has taken a risk. Onesimus has somehow shown up when Paul was in prison, and has been of considerable help to him. If he wasn't a Christian before, he has certainly become one now. Paul is sending him back to his owner, and he wants Onesimus to be released from slavery and welcomed as a free man and a Christian brother. But he can't insist on this. Onesimus belongs to Philemon, who can do anything he likes with him.

Paul's letter is a masterpiece of arm-twisting. He begins by flattering Philemon. Then he says that he has the authority, 'in Christ', to tell Philemon as a fellow-Christian what to do – but he immediately follows this up by declaring that he will do no such thing. Instead he explains what has happened, makes a little joke about the improved usefulness of Onesimus, and suggests that there has been a purpose behind Onesimus's absence because it will allow Philemon to acknowledge his return by freeing him. Finally he makes it virtually impossible for Philemon to refuse, first by saying (again) that he won't demand obedience, and then by treating the whole thing as a done deal.

It seems that Philemon took the very heavy hint and did what Paul didn't tell him. There is an intriguing suggestion that Onesimus as a free man became an active Christian minister. Round about 115AD Ignatius of Antioch, one of the early Church Fathers, wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus which said very positive things about a bishop called Onesimus. He even made the same

joke about his name. If Philemon's Onesimus was a young lad when he ran away, he'd have been in his seventies when Ignatius was writing; an entirely plausible age for a revered and holy bishop.

All three readings today are about instructions, each delivered in a different way. We've looked at Paul's careful attempt to put pressure on Philemon. The reading from Deuteronomy is less subtle. Moses has been expounding the six hundred or so detailed rules which God has prescribed for the Israelites, and he finishes by stating two possibilities. Love God, follow his ways and keep all the commandments and laws that Moses has been enumerating – and the Israelites will prosper. That is the way of life. But if they turn away from God and ignore his laws, although they are about to enter the Promised Land they will not remain there for long. That is the way of disobedience and death. They have, and will continue to have, the choice. But Moses issues a categorical instruction: 'Choose life!'

The gospel is different again. Jesus simply states what is required to become a disciple. Abandon everything you previously thought was important and valuable, and follow him, no matter what it involves. We know from elsewhere in Luke's gospel that God will provide everything we will genuinely need. But to become a disciple is a serious, life-changing matter, not something to be undertaken on a whim or (as the old marriage service put it) to be taken in hand inadvisedly, lightly or wantonly. It must be carefully considered. It is a lifetime commitment, not something that can be casually picked up and put down according to circumstances. Jesus doesn't issue orders. He doesn't give an ultimatum. He doesn't explicitly offer a choice. He just says: this is what it takes; be certain before you begin that you will be able to carry it through.

We've made that commitment. There's no turning back. We will have to sit down and re-evaluate, re-plan and re-dedicate ourselves as circumstances change. We'll fall and fail, and find ourselves desperate to let go of our cross because it is too hard and heavy. We'll need help and guidance from friends and colleagues, from prayer, from Christian companions. We have chosen life. With the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we will find the way.