

FORGIVENESS AND REINSTATEMENT

(Philemon 8-22)

Nicky Gumbel once said, "If someone punches you in the face and you don't punch them back, that is mercy. If someone punches you in the face and you don't punch them back but instead say, 'That's OK, you are forgiven,' that is forgiveness. If someone punches you in the face and you don't punch them back but instead say, 'That's OK.' and then you buy them an ice cream, that is grace. This is God's love for us.

In May 1981 four shots were fired in quick succession at Pope John Paul II. Two bullets lodged in his lower intestine, one hit his left hand and the other his right arm. This assassination attempt left the Pope badly wounded and with significant blood loss. His general health was never the same again.

The gunman, 27-year-old Mehmet Ali Ağca, was sentenced to life imprisonment. But John Paul asked people to pray for his would-be assassin describing him as "my brother Ağca, whom I have sincerely forgiven."

Two years later, the Pope visited Ağca in prison, took him by the hand and said to his face that he had forgiven him for what he had done (though Ağca had shown no sign of remorse).

Over the years, John Paul became a friend to Ağca's family. In June 2000, at the Pope's request, Ağca was given a presidential pardon.

In February 2005 Ağca sent a letter to the Pope wishing him well. When the Pope died two months later, Ağca's brother Adrian gave an interview saying that Ağca and his entire family were grieving and that the Pope had been a great friend to them.

Maybe you think the Pope was foolish and naive. Maybe you think he should have waited for Mehmet Ali Ağca to show some remorse first.

Personally, I think it's a great testimony to the power and authenticity of the gospel.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith. It is not a decorative cherry on the cake. It is an essential ingredient without which it doesn't look like or taste like a cake.

Forgiveness and restitution are the stand-out themes in this little letter from Paul to Philemon.

Philemon is a minor, more obscure letter tucked away in a rarely thumbed section of our Bibles. And yet it is a hidden gem.

As you have probably noticed, most of the 21 letters in the New Testament are addressed to churches. They tend to be a bit formal, somewhat theological, and sometimes quite long. Only four were written to individuals. These letters are noticeably warmer, more personal, more practical and they're shorter too. In fact, Philemon is more a postcard than a letter.

Written by Paul, to a wealthy Christian landowner called Philemon, it's all about a runaway slave called Onesimus. It's a real-life Prodigal Son story.

Slavery is, and always has been, a great social evil. Slaves could be inherited, traded, abused, bred or exploited. They could be killed quite legally. Shamefully, this still exists today, notably in countries like Mauritania and Sudan.

The church led the way in abolishing the slave trade, in bringing civil rights to the USA, and in opposing Apartheid in South Africa. William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu were the iconic figures of those movements and each one did what they did in the name of Christ. Some people are puzzled that the Bible does not speak with greater condemnation of slavery.

The early church did not lead a protest movement because they were in no position to do so. Many, if not most, of the first Christians were slaves

themselves. But this letter undermined the whole foundation on which slavery is built. The church spearheaded a radically new approach. It was the only place in society where everyone was respected, loved and treated as equals, in fact as brothers and sisters.

Slaves were routinely ill-treated but you don't ill-treat someone you love. Slaves were seen as things, not people, but you don't treat a beloved brother or sister as an object. Years later, public opinion changed because of the lead taken by Christians and slavery collapsed.

Slavery was very, very common in the Roman Empire. About one in three people, 60 million in all, were slaves. Rome was built on it and it was into this cruel, harsh world that Christianity burst onto the scene.

The slave mentioned in this letter was called Onesimus which means "useful". Maybe today he'd be called Andy because he was quite 'andy to have around.

Alas, his master's hopes for him were unfulfilled because he turned out to be pretty useless. He ran away and made for the bright lights of Rome, where he would have the best chance of blending in with the crowd and escaping efforts to track him down.

While he was in Rome, we don't know how, but in the providence of God, he ran into Paul who was at that time under house arrest awaiting trial.

What a coincidence! Actually, it was not luck, or chance, or fate or anything of the sort. It was a "God-incidence" as someone has put it. Because that unlikely encounter is what led to this young man becoming a Christian.

Paul told Onesimus he should put everything right and return to his master Philemon and face the music. He said, "I know your former master. I'll put in a good word for you." And this is the covering letter.

Forgiveness is never easy. Each of the three main characters in this letter had to make a brave decision.

Paul had to let his new 'son' in the faith go. That would have been a wrench for him, facing a court trial, his life in the balance. This lazy runaway thief had become really useful and hardworking. He was no longer just someone to use, he had become someone to love. But Paul said, "You must go back, it's the right thing to do." As someone said, "The first to apologise is the bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. The first to forget is the happiest."

Onesimus too had to do something difficult. He had to bite the bullet and go home. That was risky. The usual punishment for a runaway slave was to have the letter "F" (for fugitive) branded his forehead. That was to show everyone who he was should he ever dare to do it again. Some masters punished their runaway slaves with crucifixion.

But it would have been hard for Philemon to receive him back too. You can see how he might resent having to take this man back. But Philemon had been badly let down by this man. He had betrayed his trust. To let him off might encourage others to try their luck. Should he just let off this useless worker? What's more, Paul is urging him to treat this joker as a brother, as an equal.

Paul, of course, knew all about forgiveness. We first meet him in Acts 7 as a harsh, violent young man breathing out threats, spitting abuse. But he met Jesus on the Road to Damascus and amazing grace softened his heart. He never forgot how much God had forgiven him. Even in his last letters, he called himself then worst of sinners.

How did it work out? The Bible doesn't say but we do know that 20 years later the church at Colossae consecrated a Bishop by the name of... Onesimus. Who knows, it may be the same man. I think it is extremely likely that Philemon did take him back, forgive him, and restore him.

After all, if Philemon had refused to forgive, how would this personal letter have found its way into our Bibles? Philemon would have torn the letter up and thrown it in the bin.

Does forgiveness work? Or is it just gullible sentimentality? I'll leave the last words to Mehmet Ali Ağca.

"After John Paul II visited me in prison," he said, "I thought about it, and I studied the gospel at length. I know the sacred books better than many others." He converted to Christ and is currently considering the priesthood.

Let's pray...