

THE CLOSENESS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

(Philemon 1-7 and 23-25)

Paul was in Rome under house arrest but still working for Christ. A guy called Onesimus responded to his teaching and became a Christian. Moreover Onesimus was very helpful to Paul, attending to his daily needs and generally looking after him, leaving him free to do his evangelical work. Interestingly, the name Onesimus means 'useful'.

But there was a very big fly in this sweet-smelling ointment. Onesimus was a slave who had thieved from his master and run away. That was not only unforgivable; it was virtually a capital offence. Slaves were literally owned by their master who had the power of life and death over them. Who was Onesimus' master, from whom he had stolen and then run away? His master was a chap called ... Philemon.

That's all we need to know about the background to Paul's short gentle letter to Philemon for the time being.

Paul is writing primarily to Philemon because he wants Philemon to do something for him and we will hear more about that next week. But he is including in his letter many other members of his Christian family.

I looked up 'family' in the Penguin Dictionary of Jokes. There was a huge list of one-liners – almost as long as that under 'lawyers'. Here are three of them. A family is just like a bath. At first it's OK but later on it's not so hot. What did your daughter do last weekend? Her hair and her nails. My salary goes into 5 figures – my wife and 4 kids.

But I like the rather longer one about Sally who came home with her new fur coat. When her daughter saw the coat she yelled; *Mam, you should be ashamed of yourself wearing a fur coat! Don't you realise that a poor dumb animal has suffered for that?* Sally looked at her daughter angrily and shouted: *Don't you dare to talk about your father like that!*

Of course it's OK to joke but there are lots of families who for one reason or another have hard and difficult lives to live.

By way of contrast let's look at some of the lovely and loving words used by Paul at the start and end of his letter to Philemon.

In the first two verses of the Philemon letter we get:

Our brother referring to Timothy.

Our dear friend and fellow worker referring to Philemon himself.

Our sister referring to Apphia, who was probably Philemon's wife.

Our fellow-soldier referring to Archippus, who was probably Philemon's son.

And in the last but one verse we find:

My fellow prisoner referring to Epaphras.

My fellow workers referring to four other people.

Everything in those descriptions is inclusive and redolent with thanksgiving and love and praise.

The thing is, they were all in it together and Paul recognised and celebrated it. They looked to each other and looked after each other.

Move forward about 2,000 years to a 150+ year old pretty church in a commuter village opposite one of the village pubs. Where do we find ourselves? Yes, we're right here at St. Mary's in Long Newton.

They were all in it together. They looked to each other and looked after each other. That's what we've just seen from the beginning and end of the Philemon reading. Let's see if we can work out how that plays out here at St. Mary's

I have identified 10 elements – there may be more but today we'll stick to these 10. Any connection with the same number of the commandments is purely co-incident.

Here they are:

We care for each other

We pray with and for each other

We encourage each other

We share with each other

We join each other in praise to God

We cope with change

We welcome new people and visitors

We serve each other

We are thankful for each other

We recognise and use each other's gifts

I want to examine each of these a little more closely.

We care for each other – If we know someone has a problem or is going through a tough time we are keen to help in any way we can. Only a couple of weeks or so ago I came across an example of this. One of us had recognised someone feeling a bit hurt about something and was keen to telephone to support that person. If there is a downside to this element it is perhaps that we are a bit slow to disclose our concerns and so lose the chance to experience that care.

We pray with and for each other – I am sure each of us prays privately for anyone we know needs prayer but also we have available and use the opportunity for prayer with those on duty in the Londonderry Chapel after each service and the ability, always advertised on the front page of the pewsheet, to have prayer from our dedicated team via Cheryl. Perhaps, however, we could take greater advantage of these facilities. If you have never done so, I urge you to use them. Not only will you not regret it, you will be uplifted by it.

We encourage each other – I have often been encouraged by things said to me by many of you from time to time and I hope many of you have had similar experiences. Do you remember Barnabas from chapter 4 and elsewhere in the Acts of the Apostles? He was nicknamed *Son of Encouragement*. That's not a bad nickname to be given to you though inclusive language would require it to be *Person of Encouragement* – clumsy but well worth having!

We share with each other – Home groups are very effective at this and how often, particularly when we are having coffee or tea together after the service, do we discuss what we have been up to during the past week. But could we perhaps do still better? If something good has happened – particularly if it is an answer to prayer – why not share it with all of us in the notice slot? Another thought; when a home group has finished a particular course or discussion subject – tell us all about it. The service leader will, I'm sure, be happy to find a suitable spot in the service.

We join in praise to God – The singing at St. Mary's is as good, if not better, than in many village churches. We truly seem to rejoice in singing to God in praise. Sometimes people say to me *O, I can't sing* or *I can't sing in tune*. It doesn't matter. God just loves to hear you sing to him however feeble you think you are at it. Anyway, everyone can sing and almost everyone can sing in tune. The secret – just ask Tom or Audrey or Ruth – is to open your mouth and let it out.

We cope with change – If the Church is to be relevant and attractive it must be prepared constantly to change. Successful churches are those which embrace

appropriate change. Those of us who are getting on a bit can find that difficult but, if you have been coming to St. Mary's for a while, you will know how much its worship and other aspects have changed and continue to change. Stay with it!

We welcome new people and visitors – This is true not only when new folk come to our services but also in our having the church open for prayer and contemplation along with the offer of refreshment in the tea and coffee sense. If you see someone new at a service perhaps you might sit close to them so they do not feel alone, to help them if necessary with any aspect of the service, chat with them afterwards and persuade them to join us for tea/coffee, introducing them to one or two others.

We serve each other in practical ways – Virtually everyone who can is involved in practical service at St. Mary's – from looking after and teaching children, through providing and serving food, to cleaning. A true all-member practical ministry giving glory to God!

We are thankful for each other – I think that each of us is grateful to God and each other for all that service – rewarding both to those who give it in its various and numerous ways and to the rest of us who are at the receiving end of it. But we are also grateful for each other as people who love Jesus as we do.

We recognise and use each other's gifts in worship – I do not think there is any other church in the Stockton Deanery which has a greater variety of people, who read, lead prayers, support people who want prayer, lead services and preach, than St. Mary's. We should always looking for people who are gifted in these ways even though they themselves may not realise it. If the Holy Spirit is saying to you that you should be involved in one of these ways, please do not ignore that call. Tell someone about it. If someone else recognises that sort of gifting in you, do consider their suggestion seriously and prayerfully. Is God asking this of you?

They were all in it together. They looked to each other and looked after each other.

What do you reckon? How are we doing? Is there more to be done for God's glory at St. Mary's?

The first part of the passage which Steven read from St. Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus is a wonderful prayer for those Christians. I thought it might become a prayer for us at St. Mary's and here it is, adjusted appropriately. Let's all say a loud *Amen* at the end when I raise my hands. Here it is:

We kneel before the Father from whom we at St. Mary's, along with his whole family in heaven and earth, derive our name. We pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen us with power through his spirit in the inner being of each and every one of us. So that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray that, being rooted and established in love, we at St. Mary's may have power, together with all the saints in other Christian fellowships, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the brim with all the fullness of God.

Amen.