

**Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 4 September 2022 –  
'A Beloved Brother' - by Revd David Cuckson**

**Opening Sentences** (*Psalm 1:1-3*)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

**HYMN Singing the Faith 507** (*Charles Wesley*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. O for a heart to praise my God,<br>a heart from sin set free,<br>a heart that always feels thy blood<br>so freely spilt for me.          | 4. A heart in every thought renewed,<br>and full of love divine;<br>perfect, and right, and pure, and good,<br>a copy, Lord, of thine! |
| 2. A heart resigned, submissive, meek,<br>my great Redeemer's throne,<br>where only Christ is heard to speak,<br>Where Jesus reigns alone;  | 5. Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart,<br>come quickly from above,<br>with thy new name upon my heart,<br>thy new, best name of love.   |
| 3. A humble, lowly, contrite heart,<br>believing, true, and clean;<br>which neither life nor death can part<br>from him that dwells within; |  |

**Prayer**

God of love and mercy, we come before you knowing that we are in need of forgiveness, our heart is not yet free from sin. We acknowledge that we have sinned against you in our speaking and our silence, in our thinking and in our thoughtlessness; in our actions and in our inaction. We have sinned against you in not loving you with our whole heart and soul and strength; in not loving our sisters and brothers in Christ. Grant us, Lord, your forgiveness, restore us in the image of your Son, and lead us along the way to your kingdom, to the glory of your name. **Amen**

Heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of grace and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit, and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no-one can understand your truth. For Christ's sake. **Amen**

**Philemon 1 - 21 (NRSVA)**

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus, our fellow-soldier, and to the church in your house; grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

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 – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to me account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand; I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

## **Reflection**

It is perhaps a bit odd to find this very personal letter of Paul's included in our Bible, especially when you think that not all Christian writings of the early years of the Church were thought appropriate to be included. It took several hundred years before the New Testament was confirmed in the form we know it today, and even then some disagreements continued. The initial moves to making a formal collection began in the latter years of the first century AD and took a reasonable shape in the course of the second century. In the case of Paul's letters it seems likely that one of his close followers gathered together some of his most treasured writings after his death, to ensure that his legacy to the Church could live on. We cannot tell now precisely how this was done, but it is thought that the letter to Philemon might well have been included because it was so closely associated with the letter to the Colossians, and there is also the intriguing suggestion made by a bishop in the early second century that it was in part because Onesimus, the subject of the letter, went on to become a leader in the Church in his own right. If true, that certainly would reinforce the underlying message that Paul is conveying. The Greek word 'onesimus' literally means 'useful' and has been found elsewhere as the name for a slave. Paul picks up the allusion, and if Onesimus did indeed go on to higher things in the Church, then he certainly would have been useful in Christ's service.

Onesimus was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon. He may also have taken money from his master to help him on his way. How he now met up with Paul we do not know. He may already have known Paul during Paul's missionary journeys and visited Paul when he heard that he was in prison. Or he may have been in prison himself as a runaway but Paul was able to negotiate his release on Onesimus' promise to return to his master. Slavery was, of course, an established part of Roman society and Paul does not try to challenge its continuance directly. Slaves of non-Christian owners were often able to attend Christian worship and the Church preferred to encourage this rather take a line that would lead slave owners to prevent their slaves from attending.

But what Paul says to Philemon ultimately undermines the continuance of slavery, because of how he describes what should be the relationship between Christian master and his Christian slave. The owner-slave relationship counts for nothing within the fellowship of the Church. Both are brothers in Christ, equal members within the family. The ultimate decision is that of the master, in this case Philemon, but Paul makes it clear what he considers would be the right and just course for Philemon to take.

And this is the approach for us to take in the Church today. Within the Church we are all equal members of the family. No one person counts for more than another. Just as in Paul's time master and slave are brothers within the fellowship of the Church - and in the case of Onesimus where both are followers of Christ Paul looks to Philemon to offer Onesimus his freedom - so external differences should never be allowed to come between fellow Christians. This is more than just toleration. We talk sometimes about a call to 'radical welcome' to be an essential part of the Church's life and mission. Age, class, gender, colour of skin do not matter. Nor should we impose any other conditions on those whom we allow into our fellowship, including any previous personal history or current life style. All are welcome, all can become part of the Church family, each can have a role in serving their fellow members of the Church community.

So Paul wrote to Philemon, 'If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me'. May that be a model for us to match today.

### **HYMN Singing the Faith 611** (*Richard A M Gillard*)

1. Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant too.

3. I will hold the Christ-light for you  
in the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

4. I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;

2. We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

5. When we sing to God in heaven  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

6. Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
let me be as Christ to you;

I will share your joy and sorrow  
till we've seen this journey through.

pray that I may have the grace  
to let you be my servant too.

## **Prayers**

God, Maker and Lover of all, we know that your way is not always easy; that peace is not given lightly, that sometimes justice comes only through struggle. We pray for the places in your world where we long to see justice and dream of peace.

We remember especially those peoples currently in the news, where conflicts seem so long-standing and complex that we cannot imagine resolution; and we pray for wisdom and reconciliation. We remember communities divided by poverty and racism, especially where the gaps between privilege and powerlessness seem to grow ever wider; and we pray for justice and healing. We remember your church, sometimes fragmented and confused, where in spite of division, your people seek to live out the Gospel; and we pray for joy and a new sense of the Spirit's power. We remember our friends, neighbours and ourselves, in those areas of our lives where we struggle to be true to what we have learned of you; and we pray for faithfulness and courage.

God, Maker and Lover of us all, who summons us in Jesus to the way of the cross, and empowers us to live by your Spirit, hear our prayer. **Amen**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. **Amen.**

## **The Blessing**

Let us go out into the world as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope, knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life, and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever. **Amen.**

*[Prayers taken and adapted from the URC's Service of the Word]*