

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's second reading is from the shortest book in the bible: Paul's Letter to Philemon. It's only 25 verses long. We hear from it at Sunday mass only once every three years. Some details are sketchy, but here is what probably caused St. Paul to write this letter:

On one of Paul's missionary journeys, Philemon heard him preach, was baptized, and became a friend of Paul. After Paul left, Philemon's home became a center of Christian prayer and of service to the needy. Later, Paul was arrested and imprisoned in Ephesus. To keep his house tidy, Philemon followed a practice quite acceptable in his day: he kept slaves. Among them was Onesimus, a name that means "useful." Onesimus got tired of being a slave, robbed Philemon, and ran away to Ephesus.

There, Onesimus visited the prison and became reacquainted with Paul. In fact, Paul came to rely on this runaway slave as a dear companion. Eventually, Onesimus had become such a good Christian that Paul baptized him, and thought it best for Onesimus to return to Philemon, the man from whom he fled, so that he could be "useful" to Christians there.

So Paul, in prison, writes this short letter to Philemon. He puts this letter - the original copy of one of the 73 books of the Bible, 25 verses, autographed - into the hands of a runaway slave and thief. Paul tells Onesimus, "Go back to your master."

There are three characters in this story, and they each meet freedom in a different way.

Onesimus was a slave who yearned to be free. He ran away, but in running away from his problems - from unfair service, from the punishment of his theft - he never was free. He became free after meeting Paul. He freely chose to return to Philemon because it was the right thing to do. The love of justice made him free; the need for a Christian community made him free to go back to what could have been slavery, but would never be the same. Now Onesimus loved justice, and justice set him free.

The second character is Paul. Paul was in prison, but he was the freest of them all. A man of sure faith, no chains could bind him. Some people put their religious practice aside whenever they feel imprisoned by pains, responsibilities or weaknesses. Not Paul. Even in jail, his faith made him free.

Finally, there is Philemon, the man who would receive this letter. He was never in jail, never a slave. He was already free in society, but Paul wanted him to be freer yet. Paul did not command Philemon to take Onesimus back. He wanted him to choose freely what to do. For Philemon, freedom meant forgiveness. If he could forgive Onesimus the wrong he had done and take him home as a free man and a brother in Christ, Philemon would feel free.

That is the message of the shortest book in the bible. Some who feel enslaved have imaginary bonds. Others who feel free are not as free as they seem. Paul gained freedom through faith; Onesimus gained freedom through justice; Philemon gained freedom through forgiveness. They all came to know Christ. Whatever has you in prison, Christ wants to set you free.