

Introduction

After I qualified as a nurse I worked for a while as a staff nurse on different wards and then on Night Duty. One of the things I had to do on nights was to go round the wards giving the intravenous drugs and in the mornings give the premedication for the patients who were having operations that morning.

One morning I checked the premed with the ward nurse and we went to the bed of the patient who was having the operation. I introduced myself and said, "You look very familiar. Have I nursed you before?" I didn't always remember Patient's names but I did remember faces. She didn't recognize me but I was sure I had nursed her before so I asked her to name the wards she had been a patient on. She went through a list of wards and the years she was in there. She mentioned a ward and added, "And when I was in there I was given the wrong drug" Realization dawned and I said - "yes it was me who gave it to you". This had been years before in my first year when I had accompanied a staff nurse to give a drug to one of our six admissions and we gave it to the wrong patient. It worked out ok as she was due to have that particular drug anyway - but I had never forgotten the mistake and it informed the way I nursed

And here I was years later, now a senior nurse about to give her a powerful drug. Can you imagine how I felt and more to the point how she felt? She had been let down badly in the past and now she was in a position where she was being asked to trust me again.

Amazingly she did trust me and allowed me to give her the injection. She was able to put the past behind her and give me a second chance.

I suspect that some of the conflict she must have felt, and would have been justified in feeling was similar to what Philemon must have felt when he got this letter from his mentor Paul. Paul had worked together with Philemon, they had shared a partnership in proclaiming the Gospel and Partnership is at the heart of this whole letter. What they share is more than simply fellowship, as the word is sometimes translated. At the heart of their relationship is warm Christian affection but there is also a sort of business partnership that is linking Paul, Philemon and the other partners in the Gospel. They are in this together. They share a joint project and if it is to go forward they must stand loyally side by side.

Philemon lived in Colossae, roughly a hundred miles inland from Ephesus. He had become a Christian; it seems, through hearing Paul preach, presumably when Philemon was visiting Ephesus. Paul at this stage hadn't been to Colossae itself but had stayed working in Ephesus.

Paul had been thrilled with the way that Philemon, a man of some means and influence had responded to the Gospel. It had gripped his heart and made him a man of love and generosity. He and his wife Apphia and their son Archippus, had joined Paul in the work of the gospel. They had gone home to Colossae and made their home a place of love and hospitality, where the handful of Christians in the area had begun to meet.

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

And now Paul had a problem. It may seem simple to us but we don't live in his world. Like every person of any substance in that society at the beginning of the Christian era Philemon owned slaves. To them it was as natural as owning a car or a television is for people in the western world today. Indeed most people would wonder how you could get on without them - they were a necessary part of household equipment. To us of course, slavery is abhorrent but to them it was simply part of everyday life.

But one of Philemon's slaves had run away. That, in his world, was a capital offence earning the death penalty, and many owners would insist on that severe punishment. Worse, the slave had probably stolen some money. And he had gone, as a runaway would, to the nearest big city. There, perhaps when the money ran out, he had met Paul and that is when his story was transformed.

The slave's name was Onesimus, which ironically means "useful" which is exactly what he hadn't been to Philemon. But now he had come under Paul's influence; perhaps he had sought him out having heard the family speak so warmly of him. And he became a Christian. So eagerly had he embraced the faith and so grateful was he to Paul for telling him about Jesus that he had begun to look after him in prison and attended to Paul's needs with a devotion he had never shown to his real master. He and Paul had become friends, brothers in the Lord Jesus and close partners in the Gospel.

But Paul couldn't shield Onesimus from what had to happen next. Nor could he shield Philemon from it. It

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

would be easy to think that he had made a fresh start, was living a new life and could just forget about what had gone before. But he couldn't. Onesimus had to face the consequences of his actions. But Paul was asking Philemon to accept him back again without penalty - and even hinted in his letter that Onesimus should be set free.

Everything in that society was against it. You can imagine the feelings on both sides. If everyone did that, the world would grind to a halt! Philemon would be the laughing stock of all his friends! If runaway slaves get rewarded with freedom then it will encourage more people to run away. - Yes Paul knew all the arguments. And he outflanked them - with the Gospel message of Jesus, King Jesus, the Lord before whom he, Philemon, Onesimus and all others were themselves slaves: household servants.

The reason for this extraordinary request, the way that Paul wanted his brother to act is at the heart of the Gospel. The Good News of Jesus Christ isn't simply a message about how people 'get saved' in a purely spiritual way. It is about the Lordship of Jesus the king over the real world, over people's real lives, over the difficult decisions that real people face. This Gospel doesn't simply restore our relationship with God through Jesus' death for us it transforms every aspect of our lives; our thinking, our actions, our decisions. The Gospel is revolutionary and it demands extraordinary responses.

Paul tells Philemon that what he is praying for, his purpose in writing, is that the partnership that he and

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

Philemon share in the Gospel will be productive. Paul and Philemon are partners, as if they were in business together, and that means they must be loyal colleagues. This partnership is as a result of their faith. When people believe the gospel they not only become God's children but they become partners with all others who believe the Good News.

This partnership must have its powerful effect. When two or three people work together in the service of the Gospel new things happen, things that might have previously been thought impossible. Paul tells Philemon that the effect of this partnership will be in 'realizing every good thing that is at work in us'. Realizing means not only recognizing and knowing but also 'putting into practice'. The Gospel itself is at work in Christians by the power of God's Spirit. As it does its work it produces new things, good things, new ways of thinking and new ways of living for individuals, households and communities.

When people believe in Jesus and join his family through Baptism, they become part of him; and the sign of that is that they grow together in love, cutting right across all traditional barriers that separate human beings from each other.

Paul is asking a great deal of Philemon. Some might say that in his persuasion he was applying huge pressure and even being manipulative. But Paul is aware that he has been given authority from God to be the church planting evangelist that will enable communities loyal to Jesus to spring up throughout Greek and Roman society. This authority gives him

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

status and if necessary Paul could command Philemon as to what action he should take. But Paul wants him to grow in his faith and so he encourages him to think through the issues and hopefully come to the right decision for himself.

Paul is acting as a mediator, which is exactly what Jesus did. By his death on the cross he brought about reconciliation between us and God. He wiped out the past and its consequences and gave new life. On the cross, Jesus hung with arms outstretched between heaven and earth, making a bridge upwards and downwards between God and the human race and from side to side between all the warring factions on earth. And Paul has grasped the truth that so many of us miss. Jesus' achievement of reconciliation is put into effect when his people follow the same pattern. When people allow the cross to shape their own lives, the love of God is set free to change and heal in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Let's take a moment to think of our own lives, our families, our community, our work places -- and ask "Where is the healing and restorative grace of God most badly needed? How can we, as God's people stand in the middle of the picture, holding out our arms to people on either side. How can we bring together those divided by large and small gulfs? Is there someone we are estranged from? What action should we take to heal the rift?"