

**Order of Service for 9th September 2007
at Sharnbrook at 10:30 am**

End of Slavery (Racial Justice Sunday)

Welcome

MH 248 – God is love, let heaven adore him

Prayers

MH 782 – We turn to you, O God of every nation

Reading: Philemon 1-21 – Take Onesimus back

Reading: Luke 14:25-33 – Count the cost of discipleship

MH 33 – Amazing grace

Sermon

MH 500 – Make me a channel of your peace

Prayers

MH 353 - In Christ there is no East or West

Offering

Blessing

Welcome

MH 248 – God is love, let heaven adore him

Prayers

500P p.12, no 4

500P p.36, no 74

TWitW p.124, no. 203

The Lord's prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

MH 782 – We turn to you, O God of every nation

Reading Introduction

Reading: Philemon 1-21 – Take Onesimus back

Reading Introduction

Reading: Luke 14:25-33 – Count the cost of discipleship

MH 33 – Amazing grace

Sermon

Racial Justice Sunday

Today is Racial Justice Sunday. One of the themes this year is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

In the 18th century, British traders took nearly 3 million slaves across the Atlantic. Africans were captured, taken on board ships, where they were chained in cramped conditions, with no sanitation and transported to the Americas. Many died in mid-Atlantic. Those who survived were taken naked to the slave market, sold to plantation owners, and branded on the chest with red hot irons. On the plantations they worked long hours, with little time to sleep. They were given very little food and were whipped mercilessly by their overseers. All this was legal and done openly.

People of faith, many Quakers, but also including John Wesley were appalled by the injustice and cruelty of the slave trade. John Wesley published this pamphlet about it. But the British Empire had made a great deal of profit from slavery and there was a strong vested interest to keep it going. Over a period of more than 20 years, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade campaigned tirelessly and sent many petitions to Parliament. William Wilberforce led the campaign in the House of Commons and in 1807 Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which banned the transatlantic slave trade.

That is what we commemorate this year. But there was still more to be done. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 outlawed slavery in the British Empire. Slavery was abolished in the USA in 1865.

Slavery has been going on since time immemorial. It was part of the fabric of society in New Testament times.

Philemon

As we heard in our first reading, Paul wrote to Philemon about a runaway slave called Onesimus. We don't know much more about him than in this letter, but we can read between the lines and try to piece together his story.

Philemon is a leader of the Church at Colossae and Onesimus is his slave. Onesimus steals some money from Philemon and runs away to Rome. At that time, Paul is under house arrest in Rome. Somehow Onesimus meets Paul and becomes a Christian. He becomes a dear friend and helper to Paul.

Now Paul is under somewhat of a dilemma. He is hoping to be freed from house arrest, but it does not help his case to harbour a runaway slave. He decides to send his messenger Tychicus to Colossae, with Onesimus and carrying two letters – the letter to the Philemon and the letter to Colossians. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes:

[You] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, *slave or free*, but Christ is all, and is in all.
[Col 3:10-11]

Paul does not challenge the institution of slavery, but he advocates a new way for Christians to relate to one another. He goes on to encourage the Colossians to forgive any grievances they have against each other and to implore masters to provide their slaves with what is right and fair.

Paul is concerned as to what kind of reception Philemon will give to Onesimus. After all, Onesimus has breached his trust. The prevailing culture would expect Philemon to punish Onesimus severely or even put him to death. But Paul is hoping that Philemon and Onesimus will be reconciled as fellow Christians. So he does not rely on his general remarks to the Colossians, but writes another letter directly to Philemon. In it, he pulls all the strings at his disposal. He compliments Philemon by thanking God for his faith in Jesus and love for all the saints. He pointedly does not use his authority to tell Philemon what he should do, but appeals to his love, pity and “spontaneous” generosity. Paul hints that Philemon should grant Onesimus his freedom, since he is now a brother in Christ.

So what happens when Onesimus gets back to Colossae? Does Philemon punish him, or does he welcome him back with open arms and grant him his freedom? The Bible does not say. But tradition says that Paul’s letter did indeed move Philemon to free Onesimus and that he went on to become Bishop of Ephesus.

In this story, we see how Paul argues the case for one individual slave in the light of the Christian Gospel. I could generalise it a bit. His case rests on the love and respect that we should give to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians have a responsibility to be reconciled with each other and to treat everyone in a right and just way.

This is not easy. Both Onesimus and Philemon would have taken risks in order to be reconciled. Onesimus risked punishment. Philemon risked being let down again. In granting Onesimus his freedom, Philemon would be going against the norms of society.

Gospel

Our Gospel reading is on a related theme. Jesus speaks about the cost of discipleship. At first reading, he seems to advocate that his disciples should hate their relatives. But I think he is just pointing out that to become his disciple would estrange many people from their families. He also says disciples should hate their own lives. Again, I think he is warning that some will be called upon to give their lives for their faith.

His two illustrations are along the same lines. There is house on Riverfield drive, near where I live, that has a half-completed extension. It has been that way for years and is now showing signs of deterioration. Jesus says that before you start building a tower, you are wise to make sure you have the resources to complete it. Jesus says that a king contemplating war will consider whether he has sufficient troops. Those thinking of becoming disciples of Jesus should consider whether they are prepared to give up everything to follow him.

When we think about being Christians, we like to concentrate on the love of God for each one of us, about the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, who died for us so that we could have eternal life and about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who helps us to live out our Christian lives. These are indeed wonderful things and give rise comforting thoughts, but this is not the whole story.

We don't so much like to think about cost and challenge of being a Christian

- about the call of God to be good and pure and just
- about the call of Jesus, whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out for others, to follow his self-giving example
- about the way that the Holy Spirit points out to us those things that are wrong in our lives and urges us into action to fight injustice, even though it may lead us into hardship or danger.

Jesus did not cave in to the prejudices of his day. He applied a new principle – that of costly love. In the end he died on the cross. It was both a consequence and a demonstration of following that principle to uttermost. He died for love and in doing so, showed love. He asks us to follow his example. He warns us not to become his disciples unless we are prepared to do so.

Today

So I want to ask what does that mean for us today, especially in the context of slavery and racial justice?

200 years ago, slavery was legal and openly practised. Wilberforce's path was to make it illegal. In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which bans slavery. Slavery is now illegal in most countries of the world. But it still goes on.

Millions are trapped in bonded labour, where people are tricked into taking out a loan and then have to work 365 days a year for basic food and shelter until they repay a debt that they can never repay.

Others are illegally forced to work, usually under threat of violence or other penalties.

Early and forced marriage affects women and girls who are married without choice and are forced into lives of servitude often accompanied by physical violence.

Trafficking involves moving people to foreign countries so that they can be more easily isolated and controlled. Traffickers go to places where there is poverty and lack of education and take away teenage girls or young women to be sex slaves. They also take people to work in other industries, including agriculture and

domestic work. They trick them by telling them lies about the jobs they are going to and also use other forms of coercion.

The worst forms of child labour involve an estimated 126 million children around the world in work that is harmful to their health and welfare.

Outside the limits of slavery, there is also sweat-shop labour where people are paid low wages to produce cheap goods.

Other issues of racial justice include discrimination against black and ethnic minorities in terms of education and employment opportunities, or even within Church life. There is also the treatment of asylum seekers and the issues raised by a multi-cultural society.

All these issues concern real people who are suffering real injustices right now. They have a call on our compassion and our Christian duty to fight injustice. Information is easy to find on the internet, but it is sometimes difficult to know what to believe and hard even for trustworthy agencies to get full information, because this exploitation is carried out underground. It seems impossible for an individual Christian to help in any meaningful way.

I don't know about you, but I get lots of letters from charities concerned with all kinds of eminently worthy causes. It is hard to find the time to read them all, let alone do anything to help. At best we can make a donation. You may recognise this serious condition – it is known as compassion fatigue. It is easy to become discouraged when the problem we face is overwhelming.

Perhaps the way forward is to recognise that one person cannot solve all the world's problems, but if we can choose one or two issues that particularly move us, we may, together with others, be able to have an impact. I apologise if this service has for you

raised just one more area of concern, when there are already too many clamouring for attention. If this issue of modern-day slavery touches your heart then please find out more about it and get involved in raising awareness and petitioning to end it. If there are other issues closer to your heart, then please concentrate your efforts there.

But do not give up. On Friday, Brenda and I were helping a friend's little girl to learn to ride a bicycle. She is only 4 and when things got a little difficult she would easily give up. When the pedals were too hard to turn, she went off to lie down and cry. When the bike tilted over onto its stabilisers too much, she was afraid of falling off and wanted to stop. But with a little help and encouragement, she got back on the bike and tried again. Soon these things will not bother her any more.

We are called to be disciples and that does mean fighting injustice amongst other things. Jesus warned us it would not be easy, and it is not easy – even though we face far less danger than Christians have done in the past. We should encourage one another and remember that we also have the help of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

MH 500 – Make me a channel of your peace

Prayers

CttRCL p.162

MH 353 - In Christ there is no East or West

Offering

Blessing

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And the blessing of God Almighty,
The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be amongst you and remain with you always.

Amen.