

As we all will know relationships and families can be complicated things! Like most summer periods, in recent weeks, I have had an influx of Australian visitors, most of whom I am related too. Some of these visitors I know very well – or I think I know very well – like my sister whom some of you met last week. Others I have barely known, though I know a lot about them.

Yesterday I spent time with my first cousin Vicky – who is now known as Victoria. She is my oldest cousin, and I always remember her because she is older than my youngest aunt. We all grew up in a small town, with only one school – which we all went too – Aunts and Cousins together. I remember Vicky being the School Captain in the 6<sup>th</sup> Form when I was in about year 3 or 4, and I remember being at her wedding a few years later - where all the kids got to sleep under the food tables while the adults danced late into the night. It was only when I became a teacher that I met Vicki again when we taught briefly in the same school – and so yesterday was the first time ever I think I have spent more than 10 minutes alone with her and her husband and we had a lovely time.

As you do, we talked about the people you have in common; and how long I am staying away – and of course I showed them around London a bit, and suggested some family icons they can visit in Scotland. I really enjoyed their company, and actually was sad we only had the afternoon together. Unlike most of my relatives, they had booked a hotel for their 3 nights in London so I won't see them again, until I am next in Australia.

I hadn't really known what to expect yesterday, and I commented to my sister last week that it would be a strange day, as we had not spent much time together but I guess we have a knowledge about each other. It has changed how I see Victoria though, and also has made me reflect on my wider extended family.

Today we have the reading of the letter of Paul to Philemon, which reads for the most part like a family and personal letter, about a person they share in common - Onesimus. Paul, in part, is trying to say to Philemon, you know this person, but you now don't know him – you need to be open to meeting him again. In many ways the letter is about the changing of perspective we have about a person; and while this letter may seem to be only about the relationship with this one person, it was written in a way that might be shared with a whole community so it would appear that Paul had a broader message about perspective and relationships which he is trying to address in this very short letter<sup>1</sup>.

Before we explore this any further it is important to note that throughout history the letter to Philemon has been misused and misquoted. For many centuries it was believed that Onesimus was a slave who had run away and Paul was returning him

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2975](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975)

to his rightful owner - Philemon. Because of this understanding this book was used to justify enslavement – particularly in America. This letter is a reminder of the danger that misquoting of scripture can cause.

We do know from the text that Onesimus was a slave, but it is more likely that he was sent by Philemon to care for Paul while he was imprisoned, and so Paul is returning Onesimus and asking Philemon to now view Onesimus in a new way – not as a slave but as a brother. Now Paul does not address the issue of slavery head on so I think we need to be careful about the words or intent we put into Paul's mouth, and sadly in Paul's time slavery was extensive in the Roman world.

What can be clear however from the text is that; Onesimus appeared to Philemon to be "useless," while he has now proven "useful" to Paul and thus to Philemon too – and secondly there seems to have been some separation or conflict between them which Paul's believes needs to be healed. There is only one reference to Onesimus being a slave and of a debt that he owes Philemon – again Paul seems to suggest that these be forgiven or forgotten. It would appear that Paul here is calling for a radical reorientation of the community's understanding of Onesimus' identity. He is no longer merely a cog in the machine of the household, no longer worthy because of the utility he provides for his master. "Onesimus is now a beloved brother. He is family. And this transformation is a vivid embodiment of the gospel. He is a walking reminder of the power of the good news."<sup>2</sup>

This story then is about how we live as a community too – how do we see each other? What relationships or ideas of people do we have to transform to move forward as the body of Christ?

This too is the notion which is addressed in our Gospel reading. Jesus is speaking to the crowd who have been following him for some time now – and he is asking them too, to allow themselves to be transformed. Jesus is abrupt and to the point they need to let go of what they perceive to be important if they are to truly be his followers – this is no easy task and it will involve sacrifice. They will need to take up their cross and leave all else behind – but what actually does this mean?

Now, like Philemon, this passage too is often misquoted. At this point Jesus has not endured the pain of the cross, nor does the crowd have a notion of the sacrifice that Jesus will make in a short while – and yet it still does mean something to them. We so often read this passage with our resurrection theology looking back at its words with what we know is to come. The cross to us has an explicit meaning in faith terms – but this meaning did not exist at this point in the story – so what is Jesus trying to say to the crowd?

Theologian Caroline Lewis<sup>3</sup> suggests that Jesus is talking about 'cost' – but not in terms of death. When faith is cast as cost, we become rather ignorant of the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2975](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4706>

life itself is costly, not just faith. Life is full of choices, of counting the costs, weighing the costs. The cross is not unique but representative of what life is. To carry your cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment -- a commitment to a way of life that is committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now. That's certainly what it meant for Jesus. Choosing the cross then, is not about choosing death but rather is about the choices we choose for life.

Faith does cost because we make choices about the way that we live; and this will mean we live with the consequences of these choices – but it is more than that. Sadly so often as Christians we tend toward saying the cross is a choice for life because it leads to resurrection – but the danger of this is that we forget the present – and it was the present that Jesus was addressing when he spoke to the crowd. Jesus is leading us to see that the choice, the cost, is the parameters of our living – it is what inspires us, what unites us, what calls us to be a community that transforms – and this will require us to risk looking at each other differently, and constantly re-evaluating our perspective.

Today we mark as a congregation many changes within our lives as individuals and as a community. There are the obvious changes which have taken place over the summer – carpet, heaters, taps, cleaning – some we will like others will take some getting used to. There are other obvious but more subtle changes too – young people who are about to head off to university – others of our community who are starting work or changing jobs. There are some in our community who have even more hidden changes as they come to terms with changing abilities or changing households. And there are changes because of the experiences that we have each had over the summer.

As we start a new academic year together we need to be open to hear the challenge of Paul and of Jesus, to not presume that we know one another – or the changes that we have experienced. We need to be open to taking up our cross, whatever that might be – that is being aware and even confident in the choices we make and no that they have consequences. What changes in relationships and transformations might we need to allow for in the coming weeks? What perspectives might we need to let go of and see anew so that we might flourish? Whatever they are let us see it as a gift of hope which allows us to continue to grow and love – as we seek to be people of God in this place. Amen.