

Today is Education Sunday – a Sunday when we are invited to give thanks for the gift of learning and pray for the new Academic Year ahead. The theme this year is FORM AND FLOURISH – TO RE-FORM¹. It took me a few times of saying this out loud to try and grasp what saying, but I was helped by Archbishop Justin's introduction to the theme.

The Archbishop says

Education is often thought of as formation. A Christian view of education sees it as a life-long process, for the whole person, so that, formed in the image of God, we may take up Jesus' offer to us to flourish and live life in all its fullness.

As we are educated, we discover who we are, our unique gifts and skills, and our role within our community, our country, and our world. Education does, however, present challenges for all of us, in different ways. Throughout all levels of education there is a very real concern about the mental health and wellbeing of both learners and teachers.

Regardless of what our challenges are, we are constantly learning and re-learning; forming and re-forming!

Education Sunday offers us an opportunity to celebrate all that is good in education, to give thanks for teachers and learners, educational leaders and support staff; to rejoice with those who succeed and provide reassurance for those who struggle.

This Education Sunday we pray that, through God's power, all those who study or work in schools, colleges or universities, may flourish and be open to knowing God's love as they are formed and re-formed.

Today we have the reading of the letter of Paul to Philemon, Paul addresses a single issue, the challenge of a slave known to both of them - Onesimus. This letter is all about re-forming a view to allow the flourishing of Philemon and the community. Paul, in part, is trying to say to Philemon, you know this person, but you now need to learn to unknow 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 letter².

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 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

¹ <https://www.cte.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=232047>

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975

danger that misquoting of scripture can cause; of forming a view and not being open to re-forming it!

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."³

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?

Education is about learning and opportunities. It is about being open to new things, new ways of understanding – not just about facts but also about people. So often we label ourselves or others in such a way to limit our forming and even our flourishing. This message to Philemon is about being open to reforming our thinking, being open to new ways of understanding, learning and being.

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, or re-formed. 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

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2975

– but this meaning did not exist at this point in the story – so what is Jesus trying to say to the crowd?

Theologian Caroline Lewis⁴ 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 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 put 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, floor and window cleaning. 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 school or 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 know 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? Or as the team working on Education Sunday resources put it:

The form and shape of our lives is a gift of God’s creation. It is the nurture of God’s community which enables us to flourish by the power of the Spirit. Only then can we find that our lives and discipleship are being re-formed daily by God, as we grow together in in

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4706>

12th after Trinity (Education Sunday) - 8th September 2019
Deuteronomy 30: 15-end; Philemon 1-21 and Luke 14: 25-33

our understandings of life together, mission, service and daily discipleship. We learn from one another through the life of the Spirit-led community, so letting God's grace re-form our lives of faith.⁵ Amen

⁵ <https://www.cte.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=232050>