

Readings for Thursday the 32nd Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Philemon 7-20

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to Philemon:

Beloved: I have experienced much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother. Therefore, although I have the full right in Christ to order you to do what is proper, I rather urge you out of love, being as I am, Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus. I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment, who was once useless to you but is now useful to both you and me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I should have liked to retain him for myself, so that he might serve me on your behalf in my imprisonment for the Gospel, but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary. Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord. So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me. And if he has done you any injustice or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I will pay. May I not tell you that you owe me your very self. Yes, brother, may I profit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 146:7, 8-9a, 9bc-10

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.

The LORD secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets captives free.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.

The LORD gives sight to the blind. The LORD raises up those who were bowed down; the LORD loves the just. The LORD protects strangers.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.

The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts. The LORD shall reign forever; your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.

Gospel: Luke 17:20-25

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus said in reply, "The coming of the Kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the Kingdom of God is among you." Then he said to his disciples,

“The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. There will be those who will say to you, ‘Look, there he is,’ or ‘Look, here he is.’ Do not go off, do not run in pursuit. For just as lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Thursday the 32nd Week of the Year

Today we have introduced Paul’s letter to Philemon. This is a unique epistle for a couple reasons. It is the shortest of all the readings of the New Testament. There are no real chapters, just verses. Paul uses all his persuasive abilities for one man, Philemon. His name has an interesting etymology. It is derived from the Greek word kiss, philema. The name could mean one who kisses, one who is affectionate or one who loves. He was a member of one of Paul’s Christian communities. Paul introduced another character, Onesimus. The name means one who is useful. That’s appropriate because the man was a slave. His name is pronounced, O’Nessiemuss (This is the third Irishman named in the New Testament. The other two are Nick O’Demus and Jesus taught Daley in the temple.)

Paul’s persuasiveness is subtle. He says he’s not commanding people to obey him. He stated that He wanted people to listen and do freely what he suggests, but this is the great apostle to the Gentiles who helped to found so many of the ancient Christian communities that made up the early Church. People would have had the tendency to hear and obey as a result. Think of him as “Don Paulus” making an offer none can refuse. Exactly what was Paul asking? Let me give some more background first.

The letter today started with verse seven so we did not read the beginning of the letter. That sets the context of it, although we heard a great deal about Paul’s situation in our reading today. In the opening line, Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. In two senses was Paul a prisoner. He was in jail for some reason, most likely for his faith in Jesus. He was also linked intimately to the mission of the gospel. He was captivated by Jesus and was his servant in mission. He could do no else but preach. With him in captivity is Timothy. Paul wrote the letter to Philemon on his behalf.

The letter has told us that Paul was not alone. He was in captivity with two other people, Timothy his co-missionary and their slave, Onesimus. Paul has also told us that he’s an old man. He cherished the company he shared with the other two men. Timothy was a frequent and intimate companion of Paul; there are two letters that Paul wrote to him. Onesimus was a runaway slave who belonged to Philemon.

Paul seemed to accept the reality of slavery. He made no attempt to free the man. He seemed to be returning him to the owner. He wanted Onesimus to remain as his companion and servant. Paul did add a complication. Onesimus has become a Christian and thus a brother in Christ. How can someone keep a brother enslaved? As a brother in Christ, Paul and Onesimus became very close like father and son. In sending him back to Philemon, Paul said he’s sending Onesimus as Paul’s own heart. He wants this slave to become a partner and man in the Lord to

Philemon. This is a real complication for Paul may in fact have asked the owner to free a slave that belonged to him. Paul may also have asked to retain Onesimus as his servant.

The conversion of Onesimus may have been in other ways too. Apparently, the slave had wronged the owner. First he ran away from Philemon. Paul implied that there may have been reason for the escape. Perhaps Onesimus was lazy, useless (contradicting his name) or a thief. In his service to Paul, Onesimus lived up to the reality of his name. He owed a debt to his owner which Paul offered to pay. Paul added that Philemon owed Paul his life. Did Paul save his life through some act? Was Paul the one who received Philemon, as he did Onesimus, into faith in Jesus? Was it life eternal? Paul didn't say. In my reading of this passage, Paul really laid it on thick, but also was indirect for what he really wanted. He told Philemon to receive his slave back without punishment as a brother and equal in Christ. He also wanted the service this brother provided for him. Paul has left the final decision up to Philemon. If given a choice, what would you and I choose?

"Refresh my heart in Christ!" Paul wrote as this passage ended. It wasn't the end of the letter but the end of Paul's message. In whose hands did Paul leave the decision? Perhaps it was in the hands of God for I believe that Christ would refresh Paul's heart either way. Would that any of us find peace in other's decisions for us.

There are all sorts of books written on what the second coming of Jesus will be like; and when too. Some preachers have made a very good living from talking about what it will be like. All of us may have wondered when and how Jesus would return. Jesus' own words tell us we can never know. Don't listen, don't follow and don't seek the time and place anyone sets. When Jesus returns, we'll know it. There are all sorts of "signs" that people will sight too. They really don't exist. People can always attribute meaning to things that have no meaning. Personally, I listen to Jesus.

We can keep ourselves focused on the Kingdom to come and for Jesus to return. What does Jesus say about this? "The Kingdom of God is among you." "Remember, I will be with you always..." I listen to Jesus here too. St. Gertrude in Franklin Park has a five story stained glass window of the second coming of Christ. It's impressive. Jesus is depicted as returning on a mushroom cloud. The church was finished in the early 1950s at the height of the cold war. I got a tour of it from the retired pastor who commissioned the window. I wrote it up and included a copy when people bought a postcard depicting the window. There was one detail that is relevant to this gospel and symbolized this gospel's meaning. There's a crowd of people who stood together, faces uplifted with eyes closed not seeing the event. There are three or four little children who, with eyes wide open stare out into the eyes of those who gaze at the window. If the retired pastor had not pointed them out to me, God knows when or if I would catch the detail.

Living live now is the best way to discover the Kingdom of God now and to recognize the presence of Jesus in our lives. The implication of today's gospel is clear. We live now. If we can't notice the Kingdom around us and discern Christ within us, we will miss the Kingdom and Christ altogether. God refers to himself as "I am" in the book of Exodus to Moses from the burning bush. Jesus refers to himself with the same words in the gospels. God is the eternal "now" and Jesus lives within us.

May this reading find you in good health. I may have been exposed to the virus and have gone for a COVID test on Monday. I feel fine. I am waiting for negative results, God willing in a couple days. If I am not present for mass on Thursday I have not yet heard negative results.

James D. Beath
November 12, 2020