

Sermon 4 September 2016

Luke 14:25-33 and Philemon

Around the turn of the last century (17 years ago) I looked after my nephew and niece for a week, while their parents were school and house hunting in America. It was a tough week for the children. I had a rudimentary knowledge of their school routines and after school activities, but we rubbed along together ok. They had a few more treats than usual, they did less well on their spelling tests than usual, and I passed the baton of their care onto my parents with good will and good health intact. But I clearly didn't get everything right. My nephew helped me load up the car at the end of my stint. I thanked him, but I hadn't quite used the right words. He told me that 'Daddy would have said I had been a really useful little engine'.

And although it might sound a little trite, in a way that is what Paul is saying about Onesimus. He was useful. He was really useful to Paul. As Paul was probably in prison, no doubt he would have brought food, been company and an encouragement. Reading between the lines it sounds as if he had come a believer during his time with Paul and now has the opportunity, if Philemon will accept him, to become even more useful to the church in Colossae. Even his name means useful. Though I don't recommend we all follow the attributes that the meaning of our names may suggest. Mine means princess – I doubt I'd get very far if I behaved like one!

Paul was commending Onesimus as potentially useful to the church that meets in Philemon's house. He will have developed skills while with Paul that might have included preaching, leading worship, teaching in small groups perhaps. He might have been a very good listener, a good encourager, or a good organiser. We don't know. We do know that whatever he was, he was useful.

And of course, to whom or to what, was he useful? Taken literally we would say he was useful to Paul and might be useful to the church. But really he was useful to the gospel, he was useful to Christ. For Jesus and the gospel are the person and thing to which Onesimus would have been primarily called. He would not owe allegiance to Paul or to this church or that church. He would owe allegiance to Christ.

Jesus tells those following him that there is a cost to those who want to be useful to him. The word 'hate' that he uses, is not meant in the way we use it today. He is telling the crowd that they must put him first – first before their clan, before their own lives and before their possession. It's used in the sense of loving him more than they love their parents, spouse and children, siblings or self. They can still love those people, but not as much as they love Jesus. We see examples of this in the Old Testament. We can read that God loved Jacob and hated Esau. Now this doesn't make much sense when we also read that God showed compassion on Esau and his family. It does make sense when we read it to mean that God loved Jacob more than Esau, that he favoured Jacob over Esau. And so Jesus says love me more than you love the other things you love.

And while this passage from Luke sounds harsh, and we feel like saying, well I can never do that so I might as well not start. Isn't that what Jesus is suggesting when he gives examples of those who start out building without proper resources? Or who realise they don't have the resources to win if they fight? We can take heart from what we know about those who were chosen by him. They failed to see what he was talking about, they squabbled over status and in his time of need they fell asleep, ran away or denied they had ever known him. Jesus doesn't set us up to fail, but he does want us to know that the joy of following him also has responsibility attached. We don't have all the resources we need, however well qualified we might be to do all sorts of things. In fact, Jesus often equips

those who seem to be the least qualified to do anything, to be his voice, his hands, to deliver his healing.

I wonder how we might help each other to be useful? What do you think of when you hear the phrase 'being useful'?

I know the hearts of some you will sink when trying to answer that question. You'll think, what challenges and commitment that might bring? I'm already stretched, already at capacity. It sounds a very active sort of phrase. It conjures up pictures of extreme busy-ness. But surely that's only part of the picture.

Some might see it as looking to find the thing that needs to be done and to do it, even if in fact it is someone else's job. Which then makes the person whose job it was, feel useless.

Some might stand back, feeling useless. I can see something that could be done, but I don't know how to do it. Maybe they need a coach or a mentor.

Maybe there is someone who has always been useful but is now bored or is tired, or lacks the strength necessary to carry on. Maybe they need someone to help them, to learn how to take over from them who will then be useful in their own style. Maybe they need to feel free just to feel like its ok to stop doing whatever has become a burden.

Some may hear 'being useful' in a less active sense. Providing a safe space, which is quiet, calm, peaceful, where the frantic and driven can find rest or the fearful and downhearted can find encouragement.

Some may become the mentors and coaches that enable the others to see how they can be useful.

Some may be those who recognise and discern those who are already following Jesus and for whom the cost is high, and not ask more of them.

Some may be those who recognise and discern those who are already following Jesus and yet could be even more useful to Jesus and the gospel if they were to walk a new path.

Some might become a very small part of a bigger enterprise, some might be the big part of a small enterprise.

Some may pray, some may read and learn more about the gospel.

Whatever we 'be' when we are being useful to Jesus, we apply the gospel, we live the gospel, we have our objective of sharing the good news. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Those of us who follow him, do so with joy, with sorrow, with laughter and with tears. We do so because his way, though sometimes hard, is the way of life.

Amen

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