15 November 2018: Hearing God’s Call Eucharist
Ordinary Thursdays during Kingdom Season
Philemon 7–20, Luke 17: 20–25
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Who will be the Lady, who will be the Lord

When we are ruled by the love of one another?

Those words are Sydney Carter’s paraphrase of the ill-fated Wycliffite priest John Ball’s famous sermon, delivered to the rebels, during the equally ill-fated Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Now, I confess, I don’t begin many sermons with quotes - even in paraphrase - from Lollard Preachers. But it seems to me that John Ball, like his mentor, had understood something fundamental about power, which should have been blindingly obvious to every generation of Christians, which is calling out from the pages of the texts that we have just read, and which if we understand it rightly can free us to hear God’s call in each of our lives - to participate in the restoration of all things, to see our selves and societies, divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin as they are, become subject to the just and gentle rule of Love.

But we’ll come to that. Perhaps we should start with what that revolutionary hope starts with; with what all revolution, and it could be argued, all truly human relationship starts with: with asking. It’s easy to underestimate it because it so fundamental to our humanity, but in the simple fact of asking a question is a whole universe of startling assumptions. We have worked out that there is a space we cannot enter - which holds secrets we cannot know - and that space is the mind and will of another person. But whilst we simply cannot go in to occupy it of our own volition, it is conceivable that its secrets might be made known, or that we might be carried over its threshold, if we ask...

Now there are a great many questions we might ask about any of the scriptures that purport to make known the mind of God, and before we even get to specific content, a great many questions we might ponder about the whole canon of scripture in general. People have quite rightly asked, how was this particular set of testimonies and narratives, epistles and visionary poems put together? Or what determines their status as Holy Writ?
But the question that presents itself to my mind on the rare occasions this letter to Philemon is read out in Church is more crude. What is it doing in scripture at all?

Why is it here?

This twenty-five verse handwritten note, from one elderly man probably in Rome, to, probably, another in what is now Turkey, of whom nothing is known outside the scant details of this brief message, at least a third of which is greeting and farewell, and which nonetheless seems to go to extraordinarily elaborate lengths to articulate one request, the answer to which we are never told.

This is a personal letter. What is it doing enshrined forever in the Church’s most sacred writings?

Well, people have answered that question by acknowledging that it contains the seeds of the sort of egalitarian vision that led, for example, John Ball to preach, or the peasants to dare to revolt. Clearly it is part of the scriptural witness that was gradually understood to testify against the universal practice of slavery. But if we listen carefully, it is doing quite a lot more than taking a tentative step in that revolutionary direction. It is, in almost all of its very few lines, subverting the master-servant relationship per se - in a way that moves towards the mutual submission mapped out in the letters to the (rest of the) Colossians, and to the Ephesians; that moves ultimately towards the relationship between the Divine Father & Son; and that moves any with ears to hear towards a recognition that not only slavery, but any domination of the other, is finally incompatible with life in Christ.

Here in this letter multiple master and servant relationships are used like guy ropes to stretch out a canopy under which neither term can be applied in its merely human sense, to define a realm where there is only one master and that Master is love itself. So here is Paul, not a naturally reticent person, who might be just desperately working to restrain his natural instinct to pull rank, though it slips out every now and again. But more likely is subtly playing with notions of authority and liberty - showing positions of power in order to deliberately retreat from them - in order to make the crucial point that the economy of love has no place, in the end, for leverage, or entitlement, or mere edict. Then there is Onesimus who is not Paul’s servant, but who has been serving him, and Philemon who might look to Paul as a spiritual master, but remains technically the lord of a slave he no longer owns, and to whose will Paul defers as the necessary final arbiter. In this complex interplay of status and potential a question is posed with the sort of care and delicacy that normally characterizes a dance or a kiss. A set of requests, in place of commands.
Will you now voluntarily subject yourself to the man who until now, by merely human laws, owned you? Will you voluntarily welcome back the one who effectively stole from you, not just willingly forgiving him, but promoting him in your affection as your brother? And then, perhaps just as voluntarily, sending him back to me out of the same kindness that motivates my sending him to you and his cheerful going? Will you choose - as Paul himself did - to stay in bonds you have already been freed from, for the salvation of the ones who hold the keys, and have not yet found freedom themselves?

Will you, in other words, stake out, in the No Man’s Land between Slavery and Self-Rule, a place of willed encounter between persons - a tent of meeting?

Here are the very blueprints, the manifesto, for Christian Liberty, set out not in abstractions, of course, not even in the general aspirations of a political declaration like at Blackheath, or Gettysburg, but in the singular detail of one individual relationship, in the intimate context of one particular household, in a handwritten request from one person to another.

And here is the heartbeat of the Rule of Love we are called - invited, not instructed - to willingly subject ourselves to. This is the essence of Christian vocation...

The recognition that the most visionary human aspirations are realised in the question and answer, request and response, of intimate conversation, and that our particular conversations are the threads from which the fullest expression of humanity is being woven. And why wouldn’t they be, when, as Genesis reveals, it was conversation that makes us. That makes us. And for which we are made. Heart speaking to heart. The meeting of wills ruled by the love of one another. “Let us make humankind in our own image…”

So when Christ said, ‘the coming of the kingdom will be practically invisible, because it is in fact among you’, he meant in our hearts - within us; but he also meant in our midst - between us, in the delicate interactions of self and other.

Because that is God’s primary call - the call of which our individual vocations are part - the call to be a Holy Nation and Kingdom of Priests, which is nothing other than the invitation to love. It is no coincidence that the book of the Bible most explicitly concerned with how exactly to be a Kingdom of Priests, is the one where we are first instructed to love our neighbours as ourselves; it is not insignificant that that book, which we call Leviticus, the Jewish Scripture has always called by its opening phrase Vayikra. “And He Called”, because as the rabbis have said, “Here in love God calls the people of Israel to come close to
Him, and to become, as it were, mediators of His presence and love to the world."

If you want to know what we are doing here - at a Eucharist, at a Vocations Evening, on this earth for that matter - it is learning to respond to love’s invitation, it is being shown how to construct a space for meeting, how to enter into the real conversation between persons, which is held open by question and request. It is to join in that conversation by allowing ourselves to ask - what is God asking of me?

It sounds simple, but coming to discern what that call is, is inevitably itself a delicate process - because the language God speaks, the only language of the eternal Word, is love; whereas the ones we are conversant in are power and self interest - so we are constantly mistranslating God’s idiom into ours, and mishearing accordingly.

The truth is that no-one can simply tell us how to hear God’s call or respond to it, but perhaps we are not helped by considering it to be primarily, or ultimately, about receiving injunctions. There is such a thing as Divine Command, of course, but it is summed up in the impossible command to do the thing that cannot be commanded - to love. God’s instructions are designed to teach us the sovereign liberty of the other, and train us step by step to enter the courts of love and live there.

So however else we seek to enter into God’s will, we might do well to familiarise ourselves with the language of question and request, instead of our mother tongue of manipulation and coercion; we might do well to think not of the command or duty God is free to impose on a servant, but to ask, voluntarily, what are you asking of me, Lord? Even to train ourselves to hear God ask - what do you want to give, as a friend?

Who will be the Lady and who will be the Lord when we are met in the love of one another - when even the Lord of All is the servant, and the ones who were enslaved are brothers and sisters? Who will rule when every tongue, and all our speech, is ‘Please’, and ‘Thank You’, and ‘I Love You’?

That is a good question.