

One of the family

Notes on the Bible readings

- Paul writes to Philemon and the community that meets in his home in the town of Colossae (see for background reading on life in Colossae) and challenges their understanding of how to treat slaves. The letter is about Onesimus, a runaway slave. As a runaway, he was subject to the death penalty at the hands of those he ran from. Under Roman law, if Philemon doesn't punish him, Philemon himself will be at risk of the same punishment.

- Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not only without punishment, but as part of the family. In doing so, Paul knows Philemon will also be laying his life on the line for Onesimus.

- Paul challenges Philemon with great love. He could have forced him to take Onesimus back, but he doesn't. Instead, he talks of love and in doing so reflects the abundance of God's love in an unjust world.

- There are challenges here for us with issues like modern-day slavery. Sometimes we need to use our privilege to speak out for others, as Paul did. However, there is a tension between being a voice for someone and giving them their voice back; am I empowering this person by speaking out, or can I empower them to speak out?

Questions for reflection

- ▶ What might be challenging about this image?
- ▶ In today's world, who might be the various people represented in this picture?
- ▶ How often do you reflect on your role as an advocate?



A prayer of approach

Father, we come before you as your family in this place. We think of our wider family in the Christian Church, people the world over whom we could call 'brother' or 'sister' if we met them.

Yet all people are your children.

Help us to remember that those with different lifestyles, outlooks and ideas are also part of our family, the human family, and therefore worthy of our notice – because they are worthy of yours. Amen.

A prayer for others

We pray for a world where slavery still exists:

for all those forced to work for the merest subsistence to keep them alive;

for those trafficked to satisfy the lusts or economic desires of others.

We remember, too, those whose slavery might not be apparent:

those trapped in abusive relationships;

those kept in deprivation and degradation so they cannot escape.

Lord, let there be justice for these people,

and enable us to play our part.

May we be voices where people have none,

and support them when their prison walls are breached.

May we be people unafraid to speak out,

and to step out, in the name of justice. Amen.

A personal prayer

How can I change the world, Lord?

The world overwhelms me.

I want to hide my face and shut it out.

But it has to begin with me, Father.

The change starts not with the world, but in my heart.

Give me a heart for the oppressed, Lord.

Grant me a passion for justice.

So may I help those who can't help themselves. Amen.

For reflection and comment linking this week's Bible reading to the news, current issues and events, go to www.rootsontheweb.com and click on PostScript.



Live your faith

Check out news articles and websites of people in tough places. Pray for them, and consider what practical steps you could take as an advocate for them or those like them.