



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Onesimus was a run away slave whose life was in constant danger. He had to make a crucial choice. He could spend his days hiding in the dark alleys of Rome or he could do the unthinkable and return to the master he had wronged. The laws of the Roman Empire were harsh. If he returned, his master, Philemon, had the power to sentence him to death. If he was allowed to live he would have the letter F for fugitive branded on his forehead. When Onesimus encountered Christ all was changed. He couldn't keep running all his life, he had to face up to the past and embrace a future with Christ at the centre and all that that would bring.

Paul was an old man in prison in Rome at the time of writing to Philemon. Many years before he was lost in a loveless religion and passionate hatred of anyone who would dare to follow Christ. Meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus turned Paul's spiritual blindness to three days of physical blindness. Eventually called to take the gospel of Christ to the Gentile world Paul also had a choice to make, to keep Onesimus, who had become to him a 'son,' his 'heart,' his 'helper,' or to send him back to Philemon.

Philemon was no doubt a wealthy businessman, a citizen of the city of Colossae. Someone Paul had come to know and love having brought to faith in Christ. Philemon was a leader in the growing church in Colossae and he too had a choice, to punish Onesimus, or to forgive him and welcome him back not as a slave but as a brother.

Onesimus, Paul and Philemon all faced choices involving fear and faith, forgiveness and revenge, love and hate, life and death, and yet in one sense they had no choice! Once they had chosen Christ the path of faith, forgiveness and love was set before them. A narrow path, a dangerous path but a path that led to life, life in all its fullness. So it is for us, when we choose Christ, we choose to stop running from the past and in faith embrace forgiveness and the future however uncertain and precarious it may look. When we choose Christ, we stand for truth and justice. When we choose Christ we choose to love - even love those who hate us.

John Newton who wrote 'Amazing Grace' struggled as the captain of a slave ship till he came to faith. He then became a minister in the Church of England and championed the anti slavery movement. William Wilberforce converted at the age of 26 saw it his Christian calling to campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. However today it is estimated that there are more people enslaved in bonded labour than there were slaves seized from Africa in over 400 years of trading till the abolition. The need to campaign for freedom, truth and justice is as great today. As Christians we have chosen Christ, it is incumbent upon us to call the world to him, to be the first to lead others in the ways of truth and justice, faith and forgiveness and to the light and love of God.

The traditions of the church and writings of Ignatius state that Onesimus was forgiven and freed by Philemon. He returned to Paul and later became Bishop of Ephesus described by Ignatius as 'a man of inexpressible love.' May we too be a people of such a love.



Witness: Questions to discuss

You could use the words of Amazing Grace as a focus for worship and prayer.

Please use the material in study one of the set all free booklets. Extra questions could focus on the following: Did you choose Christ or did he choose you? What situations do you think you are fleeing from that God might be calling you to face up to? What might God be asking you to give up and give back to him? Who might God be calling you to forgive and accept back?