

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In St. Paul's letter to Philemon, we experience an essential and constitutive part of our Christian identity: the call to freedom and conversion of heart. It has been conjectured that Onesimus was once a slave of Philemon who fled from his household due to some indiscretion, probably theft. Rather than face the punishment of his master, Onesimus fled to Rome where he encountered Paul and became a Christian. It is within this context that Paul very tenderly appeals to Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, not as a slave but a free, Christian brother. Paul describes his own vulnerable disposition of weakness borne of old age and imprisonment; yet, in gracious generosity he wishes to keep Onesimus not for himself but for service in the Kingdom proclaiming the Good News which has indeed set them both free. The Navarre Bible: The Letters of Saint Paul offers this very helpful and hopeful insight: "We should never have fixed ideas about people; despite making mistakes and shortcomings, everyone can improve and, with God's grace, undergo a true change of heart." This is the appeal which Paul makes on behalf of a brother who had fallen. This is the challenge at the very heart of our Christian identity: to love one another, to forgive one another, to build up and edify one another in a way worthy of the dignity of being called companions of Jesus.

Luke's Gospel continues the discourse of Jesus on the cost of true discipleship and how the spiritual tools or elements of detachment and discernment feature in that discipleship. The twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his book Prayer, offers a decisive opportunity for us to pray and reflect about our own discipleship and how the Lord calls us to continual freedom from attachments so as to be more disposed to carrying the Cross which he himself first held for us. "It is love too, ultimately, which governs discipleship. Where the prototype is both man and God, there can be no mechanical imitation. What is possible is that the fruit of Christian love, namely, a walking along the path taken by the disciples and the women, in simple and humble obedience; the kind of imitation possible is that whereby the Holy Spirit implants the mind of the Son of God into our hearts so that we may fashion our lives accordingly. The Lord is no miser when it comes to sharing his own life; and it must surely be one of the most amazing things in the gospel that, even before he himself has suffered, he speaks so freely of the cross which everyone who desires to follow him must take up daily."

When Luke speaks of "hate", it is not the strong, visceral definition we think of in our common language. Rather, "hate" in this way connotes a detachment or freedom from attachments. Jesus tells the crowds: "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Still later he exhorts them: "...anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." Jesus is preparing his disciples for the ultimate prize: glory through the gift of eternal life. This earthly life is a preparatory time of purification and testing; of letting go of the things that prevent us from surrendering ourselves to carrying the Cross which is an essential, and perhaps ironically, beautiful part of our Christian life.

—Fr. Tom