

Sermon

Κoinωνία (Koinonia)

Philemon

4th September 2022

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I wanted to bring you something I shared with the Vestry two weeks ago when we had a time away together. It was about a word which sounds rather ordinary but has great implications.

I wondered when I might tell you about it – because I thought it greater depth that I had previously realised. Lo and behold, the word appears twice in the letter to Philemon which was our Epistle reading today – so here goes.

Let me introduce this letter first. Paul had led a man called Philemon to Christ when he was ministering in the region of Ephesus. Later Philemon had a church meeting in his house in Colossae. It is possible that Apphia, whom Paul greets, was Philemon's wife, and Archippus may have been his son.

A slave of Philemon, called Onesimus had stolen money from his master and run away. He came across Paul who was in a Roman prison and Paul led him to Christ too. Paul was sending him back to Philemon with this letter asking him to be merciful to Onesimus.

Philemon had the right under Roman law to kill his runaway slave. But Paul asks him receive him back as a brother because they were both now Christians and because of the relationship Paul has with them both. There was a strong bond between Paul and Philemon. There was a strong bond between Paul and Onesimus. Paul pleaded with Philemon that whatever wrongs he had suffered should be put to Paul's account.

So what is this significant word? It appears in verses 6 & 17.

⁶ I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

These are two forms of the same Greek word: *koinōnia* and *koinōnos*. Both of these words derive from *koinos* which means common. *Koinōnos* means a partner, a companion. While *koinonia* means partnership, sharing in common, communion, fellowship. It also was used for the sharing which results from fellowship.¹

So here Paul speaks of his relationship with Philemon as a partnership in Christ. Because of it, Paul has a call on Philemon. Meanwhile because of his partnership in Christ with Onesimus he is willing if necessary to pay the cost of restoring him. Partnership involves a mutual commitment, common purpose and interconnected responsibilities.

In any project it strengthens us to have a partner. But it also may cost us as we have to support the partner as well as our own personal concerns. This is both a strength and a cost to partnership.

In verse 6, he wrote: I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. "Sharing" in that verse is *koinonia*. It surprised me that fellowship would be used in this way. But Paul urges Philemon to be active in sharing his faith so that he would have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. I think we have a very limited understanding of the good things we have in Christ – Paul would say to us – share your faith more!

¹ Vines Dictionary

To explore the implications of *koinonia* further, we need to launch out further into the New Testament.

Koinonia is used of our relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor 1:9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the **fellowship** of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

That should be surprising or even shocking! Did you think of yourself and other Christians as have a partnership, a fellowship, a commonality with Jesus and also with the Holy Spirit? It is sometimes expressed as a participation in the Holy Spirit. That really should make us sit up and take notice! That God Almighty the creator grants us fellowship, friendship, participation with himself. That we are in partnership with Him. In the same line of thinking, Paul often uses the term fellow-worker with Christ. What privilege – what openness – what a responsibility.

In the First Epistle of John, we read:

1 John 1:2-3 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have **fellowship** with us. And our **fellowship** is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

This fellowship with God has an outworking in fellowship with other Christians for we are all in fellowship with God. It is like the spokes of a wheel. They all connect to the hub. The closer they get to the hub – the closer they are to each other. The closer we are to God; the closer we are to each other.

Koinonia was translated into Latin as communion. Holy Communion, the fellowship meal we celebrate so regularly, is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a **participation** in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a **participation** in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

You guessed it – participation is a translation of *koinonia*. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are expressing partnership, mutuality with Christ and with each other.

Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Philippians 2. Here he describes the *koinonia* we have with God in these words in verse 1:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any **fellowship** with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion ...

What is it like to be “in Christ” – it is to be united with Him. We are comforted by his love. We receive tenderness and compassion from God through his Spirit.

And he continues with the outworking in verses 2-4:

² ... then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

N.T. Wright puts it like this in his translation:

Here’s how to do it. Hold on to the same love; bring your innermost lives into harmony; fix your minds on the same object. Never act out of selfish ambition or vanity; instead, regard everybody else as your superior. Look after each other’s best interests, not your own.

Phil 2:2-4 [New Testament for Everyone]

That is mutual commitment and partnership. We see it worked out in the early church when Luke records:

Acts 2:41-47 ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common [*koinos*]. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

On the Vestry weekend, we listened to a sermon by the late Revd Tim Keller who was a Presbyterian minister in New York. He made the point that it is not weakness to need friendship or fellowship. In Genesis before the fall when there was no sin and Adam was behaving perfectly, everything was pronounced as good or very good – except one thing. One thing was not good but there was no sin.

Adam was alone and that was not good. You see, it is not weakness to want and need friends – it is the way we are designed by God. Remember that we have seen that the Trinity means that relationship is at the very heart of God and therefore of all God’s creation.

Secondly, Tim Keller pointed out that friendship does not come from mutual admiration of each other. No, it comes when we have a common focus or a common love. Not inward but outward focussed. In Christ, we have the most wonderful, the most exalted, the most glorious common interest with our brothers and sisters in Him. That alone is a wonderful basis for deep fellowship.

We should be aware though that this *koinonia* has potential cost as well. It is not all fun and laughter. The word commitment has already been used. When we are in partnership the needs of the partner become our needs too. Legally, a partnership means profits and liabilities are shared.

So too with Christian *koinonia*. Just as there is great privilege so there is great responsibility.

I said earlier that a meaning of the word is sharing or contribution which arises from the relationship. We see that played out in the great collection that was taken up by Paul to help the Jerusalem Christians when there was a famine there. The churches he had planted around Greece gave money to help their fellow believers in Jerusalem. He wrote in Romans 15:26-27:

Romans 15:26-27 ²⁶ For [they] were pleased to make a **contribution** for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

Contribution is again *koinonia*. It is what happens when you give to help our brothers and sisters in Kondo. You are demonstrating sharing out of our relationship with them.

But sharing in the costs of fellowship also means supporting each other in other ways when troubles come. Both Paul and John referred to Christians as partakers in suffering together. ² Tim Keller pointed out that when Paul embarked on his fateful journey to Jerusalem, knowing that it would result in arrest and trial – Luke recorded, “We got ready and went up to Jerusalem.” [Acts 21:15]

They had tried to dissuade Paul from going there, but when he made his decision, Luke and the others with him, went with him towards arrest and trial. They could have abandoned him, but they went with him. Not necessarily to personal danger but more danger than staying behind. That’s what committed friends do. That is what fellowship requires.

In the Gospel reading, we heard Jesus saying we need to count the cost of following him. There is a cost in following but there is huge reward as well.

Outcome of the Letter to Philemon

We aren’t told what happened when Onesimus got back to Colossae. But we can make some reasonable surmises. This a letter was addressed to Philemon and his local church. Had Philemon not responded positively it is very unlikely that he would have let it be circulated and widely known that he had disregarded Paul’s pleads. Surely then, it is reasonable to think that Philemon received Onesimus with grace.

There is a further possible outcome: Around 110-115 A.D. the early church father Ignatius wrote to the church at Ephesus, and addressed the bishop there, a man who was also named Onesimus. This letter of Philemon was written ... around 55 A.D., and it is quite possible that a young runaway slave could be a respected senior churchman fifty-five years later. Some have detected allusions to the letter of Philemon in the letter of Ignatius, which would seem to indicate the connection is at least a possibility.³

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

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² Philippians 1:7, Revelation 1:9

³ <https://dougwils.com/books/how-koinonia-conquers.html>