

23RD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Year C

We just heard a reading from St. Paul's Letter to Philemon, one of the shortest in the New Testament and one that is heard only once every three years. The Lectionary contains only part of the letter, and even if you read the entire letter it isn't entirely clear what Paul is talking about. A bit of background will help. The man named Onesimus was a runaway slave from Colossae. He had met Paul at Rome and was being sent back to his owner, Philemon, along with this letter, which asks that Philemon treat the runaway gently.

We have no way of knowing Philemon's reaction, but we do know that Paul accepted the reality of slavery. Both the Letter to Ephesians and that to Colossians have the admonition, "Slaves, obey your human masters." It is possible that Paul did not argue against it because he felt the world was in its final days anyway. In any case, Paul did not consider Onesimus's status as slave as going to the core of his identity. Philemon was urged to accept him "no longer as a slave but as more than a slave—a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord. So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me." Along these lines and even more eloquently, Paul wrote in another of his letters, that to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Over time—over many centuries actually—such an attitude helped bring about the end of slavery in many parts of the world, but we must admit that Catholics were by and large not at the forefront of abolition. Many of you will have heard of recent attempts by Georgetown University and Visitation Academy here in Washington to acknowledge their role in selling slaves back in the first half of the nineteenth century, and we Benedictines ought not consider ourselves exempt. It's worth asking what would have been our own community's stance on

slavery if we had been founded in 1824 instead of 1924. A few years ago I was asked to give some talks in Rio de Janeiro, and while there I stayed in a Benedictine abbey with a truly beautiful church, but one that had been built by the labor of slaves imported into Brazil from Africa.

The entire institution of slavery in our country has to be on our minds these days, for exactly four hundred years ago, in August, 1619, a Dutch warship captured some 20 Africans from a Spanish slave ship (ironically named the San Juan Bautista—St. John the Baptist) and brought them to Point Comfort, near modern-day Hampton, Virginia, where the slaves were sold to colonists in exchange for goods. That was the beginning of slavery in this country. About 230 years later, at outbreak of Civil War, there were about four million slaves here—men, women, and children who had undergone three “passages.”

The first of these passages was from their capture in West Africa to some port of embarkation on the Atlantic coast of that continent. The second was “the middle passage,” a truly horrible ordeal. Indeed, from the beginning of the beginning of first passage to end of the second, about 40 out of every 100 died, mostly from disease or hunger, but with some jumping overboard because they preferred death by drowning to slavery, while others were thrown overboard by the sailors in order to conserve scarce water.

The third passage was from the time of disembarkation at some port such as Charleston to their arrival at some destination, often a cotton or sugar-cane plantation. What awaited most of them there was back-breaking labor from dawn to dusk. All of the slaves, even those who worked inside the master’s mansion, faced numerous restrictions: they could not legally marry, were barred from learning to read, were not allowed to meet privately in groups, and had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold, and traded away at auction block.

Owners could rape or murder without fearing consequences, while the slaves could be legally tortured and worked to death.

Any resistance was often met with sadistic cruelty, as a formerly enslaved woman described a torture chamber used by her owner, Valsin Marmillion: “One of his cruelties was to place a disobedient slave standing in a box, in which there were nails placed in such a manner that the poor creature was unable to move. He was powerless even to chase away flies, or ... ants crawling [over] his body.”

Separation from one’s family was one of the worst aspects. To their credit, some very distinguished professors at the University of Texas, Austin have begun a center to develop a curriculum to tell the truth about slavery for students in our nation’s schools. They describe the sort of thing that regularly occurred at an auction in these terms: “A man and his wife might be sold to the pine woods of North Carolina, their brothers and sisters could be scattered through the cotton fields of Alabama and the rice swamps of Louisiana, while the [elderly grand]parents might be left on the old plantation to wear out their weary lives in heavy grief and lay their heads in far-off graves over which their children [and grandchildren] could never weep.”

Among the questions and quandaries faced by these professors are these: “How do we account for a 3-day-old infant [put up] for sale in the market without the [child’s] parents? What does it mean that we find hundreds of children younger than 10 up for sale? These were the realities of slavery and represent the history that we are helping teachers share with their students.”

Horrible as it was, we must face these truths, including the fact that, as was recently pointed out in a special publication of the *New York Times*, that “our founding ideals of liberty and equality for all were false when they were written.” We may well glory in the eloquent words of our Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they

are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But in fact the men and women slaves were in no sense equal. Actually, in his first draft of that Declaration, Thomas Jefferson had a section that blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and that called the trafficking in human beings a crime, but as neither he nor the other founders ever intended to abolish slavery, that section was removed.

The reality was perhaps nowhere so truthfully expressed, though with a different intent, in a high-school textbook titled *Alabama History of Schools*, published as recently as 1970, which had these words: “A jail sentence or the execution of a slave was considered to be more of a punishment for the master than for the slave, because the slave was such valuable property.” In a way, that says it all: “property.” We often use the term “chattel slavery.” If that first word sounds like “cattle,” that’s because it is etymologically related to a Middle English word for cattle, that is, a particular kind of domesticated animal that is owned as one’s property. That is just what African slaves were: property, not fully human. And we dare not ignore the fact that for centuries Catholics and many other Christians accepted that reality even if they never thought of it in those terms. Such acceptance allowed them with good conscience to participate in this terrible system. Even after abolition in 1863, slavery’s legacy included Jim Crow laws, thousands of lynchings, and the terror unleashed by the Ku Klux Klan. And despite tremendous strides made by some blacks—descendants of slaves who rose to the pinnacle of their professions, such as Oprah Winfrey, LeBron James, and Aretha Franklin—most blacks in our country lag far behind whites in many ways. Blacks make up about 13% of our country’s population but hold less than 3% of the nation’s total wealth, and they are far more likely to be imprisoned and receive harsher sentences.

To help us this morning to be mindful of and really take to heart St. Paul's words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," we'll use a special Eucharistic Prayer whose preface has these lines: "You, Lord, have brought together one Church from every people, tongue, and nation, and having filled her with life by the power of your Spirit, you never cease through her to gather the whole human race into one." Through the power of this sacrament, may all of us treat everyone as our brother or sister, seeing each of them, in St. Paul's words, "beloved as a human being and in the Lord."