

Jesus characteristically employs hyperbole, exaggeration, to speak of the challenge that faces his would-be followers. Hate is a strong word. It emphasises that nothing must count more to the disciple than discipleship. In other places this negative is balanced by the promise of rewards to the follower.

The demand to take up your cross must have sounded like hyperbole to the first hearers. It would become an all too literal demand for some of them as they imitated their master in death, as they had tried to in life. Crucifixion, in the Roman world, was the means of torture and execution used for insurrectionists, those who sought to overthrow the State; and for slaves. Some Romans lived in fear of being murdered in their beds by their slaves. This was highly improbable. Slave revolts took place but they involved the agricultural slaves, like Spartacus and his colleagues, whose conditions were bestial and whose lives were short.

The character about whom Paul writes his brief letter to Philemon, our second reading, was a former slave called Onesimus. Possibly he was a runaway slave, but the punishment for such a crime was horrendous. More likely he has been sent to be Paul's servant in prison and the two have become close. Now the time has come for Onesimus to return to his master. Paul commends him and points out that he has become a Christian, implying his treatment from his master should now be better.

The Church of the New Testament and early centuries has been criticised for failing to condemn slavery. It needs to be understood that slavery was such a part of life in the ancient world, and had been for so many centuries, that no one, not even the philosopher Epictetus, who had himself been a slave, condemned the institution or called for its abolition. However, many slaves found the idea of following Christ attractive because he had died the death-of-a-slave on the cross, he talked about service and taking the lowest place, and his mother called herself "the slave of the Lord" who did the will of her Lord.

Today is Racial Justice Sunday. Racial issues have many causes but, as the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Jnr's "I have a dream" speech, and the health concerns of Nelson Mandela remind us, a great number of tensions regarding race arise from the history of the oppression of black and coloured people by white people, and the institution of slavery in different forms.

Let us look at what slavery meant in the world of Jesus, which was influenced considerably by Greek culture and Roman authority. Both Greek and Roman society depended on slaves to function and to thrive. I do not know whether slavery was extensive in Judea, Samaria and Galilee. I suspect it was not widespread, though the elite might have had slaves; and the Roman Governor would undoubtedly have had slaves in his entourage because every Roman household, including the poor, had slaves. Jesus' use of the term tells us that people knew about it; and certainly they knew, and dreaded, crucifixion.

There were different types of servitude in the ancient world. The worst was the slavery of the mines or the quarries, the fields or the factories. Here there was no contact with a master, so no chance to impress; and much cruelty. Slaves were manacled at night. Lives were brutal and short.

The household slaves were better off but must perform any duty asked of them. Those employed as nurses for the infants or teachers for the boys might well have become integrated within the family, and be valued, well treated, fed, and in the Roman world, could hope for freedom, manumission, some day. Cicero's secretary, Tiro, was essential to his Master. In Robert Harris excellent books about Cicero, Tiro is the narrator. A skilled slave was a treasure, one who could cook well inestimable, but no position was ever secure.

It is estimated that one in three or one in four people in the ancient world would be slaves. And anyone could be reduced to slavery if captured in battle or siege. While conditions for many were harsh, it has to be remembered that life was hard for most people. Slavery might actually be preferable in some cases and so some folk sold themselves into slavery.

In law, as to some owners, slaves lacked person-hood. They had no rights. If required to give evidence it had to be given under torture as it was accepted that otherwise they would lie. A master could condemn a slave to death at whim. A Vedius Pollio would have had a slave thrown into a pond filled with lampreys (rather nasty eels) for the crime of breaking a crystal goblet, had not the Emperor Augustus intervened.

A slave who achieved freedom could become wealthy. Pallas and Narcissus, former secretary-slaves to the Emperor Claudius, both owned large estates. But the stigma of slavery always marked them. No Roman citizen would associate in public with a former slave. Their children however, were free and Roman citizens, and one such was the ancestor of the poet Horace.

Slavery by our standards is iniquitous. But no one in the ancient world, no one, challenged it. It was part of life. It was the way things were.

Slavery remains iniquitous. It also remains in many forms and guises, not least through people-trafficking. Ending slavery in all and every form is a battle which must be constantly fought, and eventually won.

{See lectures 12 & 24 of Robert Garland's "The Other Side of History: Daily Life in the Ancient World", In The Great Courses, Virginia, 2012. A first class series of talks, with a Book which accompanies the series}