
⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... ²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Philemon 4-7, 20 (NRSV)

If you were to bring to mind a 'place' to which you go to find 'refreshing for the soul', to where would you go? For some people, the chance to 'get away' to perhaps some beautiful rainforest or bushland brings 'times of refreshing'. Others may think of travelling to some holiday destination overseas. For other people, their 'inner bogan' may see them go to some loud motor race or other event like 'tractor-pulling competition'. Others may think of going to the pub with their mates. Some may think of 'family time'. And others may think of withdrawing into their 'special room' that is their own where they 'get away from people'. Where is 'your place' that you find 'refreshing of the soul'?

As we gather in worship this day and remember the opportunity to serve through 'Bayside Community Care', we also may remember that for many people finding a 'place for the refreshing of the soul' may be quite difficult. We see this not only in the need in our local community, or when we look at much strife and conflict in the world. We also know this from our personal experience, either in our interactions with other people, or the experiences of our own lives.

But when we remember the great needs in the world, and the challenges so many people face in so many ways, does this not mean we cannot find a 'place' (literally or metaphorically) to experience 'refreshing of the soul'? Sometimes we may feel a little 'guilty' when experiencing 'good times' when we know others are going through 'difficult times'. At other times we may feel 'weighed down' by what we feel are unrealistic expectations others have placed upon us to work and serve and give in this world. Where do you 'find balance' is 'giving and receiving'? And is the 'measure you use' the 'measure that should be used? (In other words, have you got the balance right in caring for self, and caring for others...?)

When we come to our Bible Reading for today, in the letter from the Apostle Paul to his good friend Philemon, we hear of the Apostle Paul speaking about 'being refreshed'.

The context of this letter is that the Apostle Paul is under house arrest (probably in Rome, but possibly in Ephesus). Paul wrote this letter to

Philemon, a believer in Colossae who, along with others, was a slave owner. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had apparently stolen from him and then run away, which under Roman law was punishable by death. But Onesimus met Paul and through his ministry became a Christian. Now he was willing to return to his master, and Paul writes this personal appeal to ask that he be accepted as a Christian brother.

Paul writes a personal letter to Philemon asking him to forgive and receive back Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus. Paul asks him to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Paul points out that maybe the reason he ran away was so that he could be saved. Paul recognizes the good that Philemon has been doing. He also recognizes that Philemon has been wronged. Paul offers to pay Onesimus' debt. Paul models Jesus' behaviour in taking Onesimus' debt. Philemon has the right to exact payment and punish Onesimus. Paul asks him to not only lay down that right, but to receive him with open arms, lovingly as a brother.

Paul begins his letter by speaking of his (Paul's) prayers for Philemon. Paul was constantly thinking of his Christian brothers and sisters. He always held them in his heart out of love. As in most of the letters his heart overflows for the people he is writing to. And he does this in this case because of the love Philemon demonstrates, and the faith that he has towards the Lord Jesus. And also for the love and faithfulness that he shows to all God's people in his attitude towards them and what he does for them. He mentions love first because it is especially to Philemon's love that he will be appealing. Where is 'refreshing' found? In praying for one another...

Paul then speaks of 'sharing' or 'fellowship' (in Greek, *koinonea*). This verse is difficult to translate because it could mean (1) a sharing in, like a partnership in a business; or

(2) sharing in the Christian faith, that is, together growing in a deeper understanding of the faith, or (3) it can mean the act of sharing, that is, sharing the benefits of the faith with others... Of course, it could well be that all three meanings are implied (and hence the ambiguity). Where is 'refreshing' found? In sharing together...

Paul then also acknowledges "I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you." Obviously Christian generosity was a characteristic of Philemon; he had love to God's people, and in his home they were rested and refreshed.

And then Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus back as if Philemon were receiving Paul himself. In his appeal, Paul says that Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus will "refresh" his heart. In the face of a tough situation (the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus), Paul is looking for a

glimpse of Jesus. Paul also says, “Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.”

There is a story told of a television evangelist who was eventually imprisoned for embezzlement. At his very lowest point, a prison official came to him and said, ‘Billy Graham is here to see you!’ He thought, ‘Billy Graham has come here ... to this place ... to see me.’ When he walked into the room Billy Graham turned towards him and opened his arms wide. He said at that moment he felt total acceptance and love. ‘I will never forget that the man who had just been voted one of the most influential men in the world and who has ministered to millions of people took time out of his busy schedule to come minister to one prisoner.’ He describes how in the midst of his depression, flu, filth and hopelessness, Billy Graham’s visit refreshed his heart and boosted his spirit. ‘I felt as though Jesus Himself had come to visit me.’

Refreshment means restoring strength, energy and vigour. A light snack is sometimes referred to as a ‘refreshment’. Physical refreshment can also come, for example, from sleep, rest, or exercise. Paul said to Philemon “I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus. (Philemon 1:5).

The Bible says “Love the Lord, all you His saints” (Psalm 31:23). The Bible also says “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and therefore “love is from God” (1 John 4:7). It is our profound love for and trust in the Lord Jesus that will refresh our brothers and sisters most. Only the water Jesus has quenches the thirst of the human soul (John 4:13–14), and we can only give it to others when we are drinking it ourselves. And this is not some ‘law’. Rather, this is ‘Gospel’ as we rest in the presence of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus.

Times of refreshing come from ‘the presence of the Lord’ (Acts 3:19). We can receive this refreshing every day. God’s mercy is new every morning. You can make a fresh, new start every single day. Every day you can seek Him, wait for Him quietly, hope in Him, and be refreshed by His presence. When we realise how much God has forgiven us, and how great is His mercy, we can more easily forgive those who have hurt us and extend mercy to them. This is the key to great relationships.

These are not naïve or superficial words of encouragement. They are realistic about the depth and extent of suffering and struggles without and within. Yet in the midst of all this, we can hang on to the goodness and love of God: ‘Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed’ (Lamentations 3:22).

Now as a footnote... there was a Bishop in Ephesus at the end of the first century with the name ‘Onesimus’. There is some debate as to whether this is the same ‘Onesimus’ mentioned here by the Apostle Paul – although is it not unreasonable to think so. Bishop Onesimus was significant in ensuring Paul’s various writings were preserved and circulated amongst Christians. Possibly because of one runaway slave, and the love of his master, Onesimus helped

keep the message of Jesus alive in the writings of Paul. How significant, then, may this letter (and what happened around it) for the life of the church...

When we act in love toward another, we produce a ripple of love and a glimpse of Jesus that spreads far beyond our own life. Our acts of kindness and love have the potential to change the lives around us. But we always do so in the light of Christ's loving serving to us.

Jesus gives a great invitation to those of us who are worried, worn out, and beaten down, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). The Greek word for rest (*anapauo*) is the same word translated refreshed in Philemon 1:7. Interesting. You see, the Lord wants to give you rest from your weariness and refresh your soul to give you a new lease on life.

When we bear one another's burdens, we follow His example and fulfil His will for our lives (Gal. 6:2; 1 John 3:16). But we do so in the light that Jesus endured the pain of the cross on our behalf, and our true refreshment is in Him. What a wonderful gift. Amen.