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Hushai's counsel. The book of Philemon and the New Testament teaching on slavery.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Samuel 17. Moreover Ahithophel said to Absalom, Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee.

I will strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace. And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

Then Absalom said, Call Hushai the Archite also and let us hear what he has to say. And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, Thus has Ahithophel spoken, shall we do as he says? If not, you speak. Then Hushai said to Absalom, This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good.

Hushai said, You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides your father is expert in war, he will not spend the night with the people. Behold even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits or in some other place.

And as soon as some of the people fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom. Then even the valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear. For all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man, and that those who are with him are valiant men.

But my counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person. So we shall come upon him in some place where he is to be found, and we shall light upon him as the dew falls on the ground. And of him and all the men with him not one will be left.

If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city. We shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there. And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel.

For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom. Then Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, Thus and so did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and so have I counseled. Now therefore send quickly and tell David, Do not stay tonight at the fords of the wilderness, but by all means pass over, lest the king and all the people who are with him be swallowed up.

Now Jonathan and Ahimeaz were waiting at En-Rogel. A female servant was to go and tell them, and they were to go and tell King David, for they were not to be seen entering the city. But a young man saw them and told Absalom.

So both of them went away quickly and came to the house of a man at Bahorim, who had a well in his courtyard, and they went down into it. And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, and nothing was known of it. When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house, they said, Where are Ahimeaz and Jonathan? And the woman said to them, They have gone over the brook of water.

And when they had sought and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem. After they had gone, the men came up out of the well, and went and told King David. They said to David, Arise and go quickly over the water, for thus and so has Ahithophel counseled against you.

Then David arose, and all the people who were with him, and they crossed the Jordan. By daybreak not one was left who had not crossed the Jordan. When Ahithophel saw that his

counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city.

He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father. Then David came to Mahanaim, and Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. Now Absalom had set Amasa over the army instead of Joab.

Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had married Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead. When David came to Mahanaim, show by the son of Nahash from Rabba of the Ammonites, and Mekiah the son of Ammiel from Lodabar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogallim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat.

For they said, The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness. Hushai the Archite, the friend and the advisor of King David, has returned to the city of Jerusalem, intending to get close to Absalom and serve under cover for David, while David is in exile. Unsurprisingly Hushai came under immediate suspicion, on account of his friendship with David and his seemingly unstable loyalties.

However, Hushai answered the questions of Absalom shrewdly, claiming that his loyalties had only ever been to the throne, and that now Absalom was manifestly the divinely intended and nationally acknowledged King of Israel. In this answer Hushai both resisted the implication that his loyalties were unstable, and he flattered Absalom by implying that Absalom's claim and grasp upon the throne was so certain that Hushai's loyalty to him would naturally be absolute. Having survived this initial test, Hushai is now in a position to prostrate the council of Ahithophel in chapter 17.

Ahithophel's council is for him to gather 12,000 men, an overwhelming force relative to David's small band, symbolically representing all Israel too, to pursue after David that night and to come upon him while he is weary and discouraged. David's men would flee, and David would be captured. There is a general consensus that Ahithophel's council is correct.

His council is held in the very highest esteem more generally. However, Hushai had so successfully made the case of his loyalties that, even with an almost complete agreement, Absalom still turns to him to ask for his advice. Hushai now has his work cut out for him.

He has to make a case compelling enough to win everyone away from the shrewd advice of Ahithophel, who is held in the very highest of esteem, and he has to commit them to a much less successful course, all while not arousing any suspicions. The way that he does so is nothing short of masterful. It's a brilliant display of persuasive rhetoric.

Shimomba Ephrat helpfully analyses the way that Hushai achieves this. He declares that Ahithophel's advice is not good this time. This affirms the general goodness of Ahithophel's council, while disagreeing on this particular occasion.

And he pauses before he resumes. This creates some tension and anticipation. In verses 8-10 he explores the weak points, or supposedly weak points, of Ahithophel's plan, and in verses 11-13 he proposes an alternative.

Hushai's response downplays the significance of his own advice. Essentially, he says to Absalom, you know. You know all of this already about your father.

You don't need me to tell you. David is Absalom's father and surely Absalom would know him very well. Hushai is careful not to draw too much attention to the part that he is playing.

Hushai is also concerned to conform his advice to Absalom's point of view, hence the repetition of your father. Ahithophel's advice, by contrast, was sloppy in this regard. It concerned David, the king, and one man.

He did not successfully present things from Absalom's viewpoint. Hushai emphasises that the people with David are his men. He underlines their intense loyalty, suggesting that they won't be so readily divided from David as Ahithophel's counsel implies.

They aren't just people, as Ahithophel speaks of them. Hushai doesn't say a lot of this explicitly. He communicates it with the way that he frames things.

Their subtle insinuation can often be more powerful than the explicit claim. He frames the fact that David and his men are mighty men and enraged, as if these things are essential features of their character. And he underlines both of these characteristics.

He uses colourful illustrations. A bear robbed of her cubs. Throughout Hushai's language is vivid and compelling.

He evokes the heroic period of David's life by his descriptions, with talks about bears and lions and all these mighty deeds. Absalom and his men might have thought that they were pursuing an aged king, but David is still at heart the hero of Israel. He also, in response to an argument from Ahithophel founded on David's condition, focuses on David's character.

He emphasises David's preparedness as a man of war and suggests that there are a great many hiding spots he could use, giving a particular illustration. He suggests that David and his men might well be lying in wait for a pursuing army, ready to strike a damaging blow, and that rumours of David's strike against Absalom's men could easily spread, blowing up into tales of a great defeat, all serving to turn the tide against him. The hearts of former supporters of Absalom would fail them.

Whereas he had previously spoken of David's men, when speaking of the men around Absalom he merely speaks of them as the people who follow Absalom, implying that they could easily be divided from him if things turned sour. He speaks about David's valiant men in the plural, but he gives an example of even the valiant men among Absalom's forces, insinuating that Absalom's men are of a very different calibre. The valiant man is exceptional, not typical among them.

He concludes by broadening his claim about knowledge. Not only does Absalom know these things about David, his father, all Israel does. Now things are set up for his alternative proposal.

David's men are of such great quality that they can only be overcome by great quantity. Absalom needs to muster men from throughout Israel, and this will buy David valuable time. Again Hushai is careful to make his language colourful and compelling.

He uses similes drawn from nature, as the sand of the sea for multitude, and as the dew falls on the ground. His language is also redolent of the language of divine promise and truth, and so is much more calculated to receive a positive response. The comprehensive references to Israel, all Israel, and from Dan to Beersheba, suggest not only the extensiveness of the force, but also Absalom's status as the commander of the entire nation.

Whereas Ahithophel foregrounds himself as the one who would work out his plan, Hushai constantly speaks of we, and more importantly of you, in reference to Absalom. All of Israel should be gathered to Absalom, and Absalom should go out before them. This plays to Absalom's aspirations.

In the second part of the speech, David is passive, and his men's loyalty is downplayed. Even if David uses the time he is granted to fortify himself in a city, and he is found there, the city can be torn down by the sheer numbers of people against him, and there will be nothing found of that city anymore, not even David. There is no mention of fighting, the victory will be almost a matter of course on account of the overwhelming force.

Absalom and the men of Israel, who might be different from the elders of Israel who were mentioned earlier, are won over by Hushai's brilliant speech. However, despite Hushai's shrewd rhetoric, it is ultimately the Lord that makes him successful. Hushai then relays the news to Jonathan and Ahimeaz, the sons of the priests, who would send the message on to David.

They are discovered however, and Absalom's servants go looking for them, while they fled to Behorim, where David had been cursed earlier by Shimei. There they are hidden by a woman, who sends the men out in a different direction, and this is all reminiscent of the story of Rahab and Jericho. They then bring the news to David, and they all cross

over the Jordan that night.

This might remind us of the story of the Exodus and being pursued to the Red Sea, crossing over the Red Sea by night, or perhaps also Jacob's crossing of the Jabbok. When he sees that his counsel is rejected, Ahithophel goes, puts his affairs in order, and kills himself. This might seem to be an overreaction to the situation, but it is probably more likely that he saw ahead and recognised what was going to happen when his advice was rejected and Hushai's followed.

Having crossed over the Jordan, David and his men came to Mahanaim, while Absalom crossed the Jordan in pursuit of him with all of the men of Israel. This associates David with Jacob. Jacob had spent time with Mahanaim when Esau's forces were coming out against him.

At Mahanaim, David receives aid from kings and others of the region, who provide him and his men with various of the necessities that they need. A question to consider. Wisdom and shrewdness are common themes in this and the preceding chapters.

What may be some of the lessons that we are supposed to draw about wisdom through these chapters? The Book of Philemon I, Paul, an old man, and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel. But I prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you and the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's

epistles, and after 3rd and 2nd John, the shortest book in the New Testament. Although other theories exist, it was most likely sent to Philemon in Colossae, at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians was sent there by the hand of Tychicus.

It is written concerning a runaway slave named Onesimus. Some in the later tradition have identified Onesimus with the Bishop of Ephesus, who was martyred in the reign of Domitian, possibly in the first half of the 90s AD. Slaves were a feature of the ancient world.

When we think of slavery we tend to think of the race-based chattel slavery of the American antebellum South, which was fundamentally founded upon man-stealing. Slavery in the ancient world was also a vast and brutal institution. Much of Rome's economy depended heavily upon slavery, and hundreds of thousands of slaves were captured in wars in Europe and elsewhere.

Others had been kidnapped by pirates. Some slaves had been rescued from exposure as infants. A few sold themselves into slavery to improve their conditions.

Some have estimated that over 30% of Roman society were slaves. It is important that we recognise the greater complexities of the institution. In many less developed societies slavery could not easily be wished away.

If a person was indebted or displaced, the choice might be between being a slave or suffering in extreme hunger and want. Manumission, while an improvement in legal status, would probably not have been a step up in material conditions for many, but would have reduced them to destitution and the terrible indignities and cruelties of poverty in Roman society. The conditions enjoyed by slaves could vary widely.

Harsh and inhumane treatment of slaves was very common. However, in some cases, slaves of wealthy and high status masters could enjoy influence and even wealth of their own. Masters provided the food, clothing and shelter that their slaves required.

Other slaves could be valued and honoured members of the households that they served. Slaves could be found doing all sorts of jobs in society, with many levels of expertise. Epictetus, who lived around the same time as Onesimus, became a great Stoic philosopher for instance.

In Galatians chapter 4, Paul compares the condition of the child in his minority to the state of a slave. The comparison could also work in the other direction. The slave was under the direct and practically absolute authority of another party over their actions, bodies and lives.

They could be corporally punished by their masters. Their position was one of great vulnerability, and very great many were used for sexual purposes and abused in this and other ways. However, slaves could often enjoy much greater material security and

provision than freedmen, who without a master to provide for their essential needs, were at greater risk of extreme poverty.

In neither the Old nor the New Testament is slavery rejected as illegitimate in principle. This is not, however, to suggest that either testament is ambivalent to the cultural practice. The Old Testament tells us stories of slaves, stories of Hagar and Eleazar of Damascus, slaves of Abraham.

The story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph illustrates both the ways that a slave could rise in their household, but also how vulnerable slaves were to oppression and mistreatment. The story of the children of Israel brutally oppressed by the Egyptians is another story of slavery.

However, while oppression is a theme in some of these stories, it is not a universal feature. Some slaves enjoyed great privileges. Eleazar of Damascus, prior to the births of Ishmael and Isaac, was going to inherit the entirety of Abraham's household.

We also see in Abraham sending his servant to find a bride for Isaac, that that servant clearly enjoys great authority to act in Abraham's name and to manage his affairs. The Egyptians were saved from starvation in the famine through giving themselves over to slavery to Pharaoh. Some slaves loved their masters, desired to remain in their master's households for life, and performed a right to bind themselves to their masters.

There were forms of slavery designed to allow poor women to marry into richer families. The law reminds Israel of their own experience of slavery in Egypt, and while permitting them to own slaves, is concerned that the slaves are treated with justice and equity. Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 12 to 18 is an example of Old Testament teaching concerning slavery.

And in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress.

As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you, therefore I command you this today. But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an oar and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever.

And to your female slave you shall do the same. It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

Treating slaves well was not really a matter of expediency in the law, expecting to get more work out of them. It was a matter of basic morality secured by the Lord as the

patron of slaves, and backed up by the rationale of Israel's own recollection of the experience of oppressive servitude. The New Testament continues in this same vein.

Slavery is not directly condemned as an institution, but its cultural logic is radically undermined and replaced with a Christian logic that does not dispense with the form, but utterly changes its principles of operation. Colossians 3.22-4.1 In Ephesians 6.5-9 In Paul's teaching then, servants were encouraged either to act toward their earthly masters as those living out of a more fundamental state of servanthood, to a gracious, loving and good master, or to think of themselves as sons in relationship to Christ, acting obediently toward their earthly masters for his sake. Masters were to see themselves as slaves of a higher master, having this in common with their servants and being accountable for their treatment of them.

God is impartial, and unlike Roman courts, will not favour the unjust master over his abused servant. God is the patron and the protector of the weak. Even more importantly, Christ himself came in the form of a servant, and the pattern of Christian ethics is set by a master who willingly assumed the path of service.

The New Testament is not an egalitarian document. It assumes and sometimes justifies a hierarchical order in society, with rulers, parents, husbands and masters occupying places over others, places which are not delegitimised. Perhaps more challenging to us, nowhere does the scripture suggest that a person's soul is in jeopardy by virtue of possessing a slave.

This is not because the scriptures are hesitant in calling out sin. However, nor is the scripture simply a book legitimating and supporting the status quo. Slavery while not delegitimised, is neither idealised nor meekly tolerated.

The scripture frequently speaks into the institution to transform its operations, on the basis of God's concern for the slave and the human kinship of the master and the slave, a kinship to which the scripture constantly alerts us. This transformation is not undertaken for the purpose of rehabilitating the institution though, as if slavery just needed a bit more spit and polish. Rather, throughout the scripture the movement is towards release from slavery and into the independence, maturity and providence that slavery stifles and for whose lack it could often substitute.

While our society may commit itself to equality in principle, it often struggles in practice, as people clearly are not equal in their talents, abilities, capacities, their economic standing, their social and family backgrounds, the authority that they enjoy and any number of other criteria. While we talk about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome for instance, we can try to realise equality in ways that set us up for constant frustration, as while there are areas where fairness must clearly be displayed, the natural differences between people will constantly produce diverging outcomes and any attempt to level these outcomes will tend unfairly to stifle people in the expression of

their gifts. Indeed many of these attempts at equality can produce harsher situations, such as where the supposed justice of meritocracy leads to the justification of the much greater wealth or status of some being perceived as a natural right that they enjoy, when formerly it might have been attributed to the grace of God or unmerited fortune.

Such equality of opportunity may serve only to underline our great natural differences. Part of the power of the teaching that we find in Paul and in the rest of the New Testament then, is the way that it speaks the levelling reality of the Gospel into situations where social hierarchies are taken for granted, are not expected to disappear and in some cases are even affirmed. The Gospel does not abolish slavery, but it makes it impossible ever to think about it or practice it in the same way again and as many have observed, thereby sows the seed for the progressive social delegitimization and the later abolition of the institution.

The Gospel focuses its vision of equality beneath the surface of the social order. In the process it denies the social order finality and insists that it be approached and regarded in terms of a more fundamental and determinative reality, given by virtue of the facts of human creation and redemption. Every human being is beyond exchange value and is of incalculable worth in the sight of God.

Whoever someone is, wherever they stand in the social order, this is true of them. In the life of the church, in particular in the light of redemption, this fact is brought into fuller expression. For an institution like slavery, characterized by the negation of the personhood of others and their reduction to mere possession, a true recognition of this fact would over time prove fatal.

And now we are in a better position to appreciate the power of Paul's argument in Philemon, which is shot through with the logic of the Gospel. Onesimus fleeing from Philemon came to Paul and apparently was converted through Paul's message. Paul sends him back to Philemon but sends him back with an appeal.

Paul could have commanded Philemon. Philemon arguably owed Paul his spiritual life and Paul was in a position where he could have laid requirements upon him. However, by appealing to him, he affords him the opportunity to act in the maturity and the freedom of love.

As Paul says, he desires Philemon's goodness not be by compulsion but of his own accord. The Gospel more generally is characterized by a rhetoric of appeal, exhortation and persuasion rather than direct command. As persons acting in the freedom of the spirit rather than under the command of the law, we are those who obey from the heart.

And so we are appealed to as those who are mature, who are to obey from the heart and with reasons that have been given to us and internalized. Prior to his escape, Onesimus was not a good servant to Philemon. But since his conversion, he has become of great

assistance to Paul and will likewise be of great usefulness to Philemon.

Receiving Anesimus back now, Philemon won't just be receiving a bond servant but someone beloved, as a now reformed man of his household but also as a brother in Christ. Paul encourages Philemon to see God's hand in all of this. Through Anesimus' departure, God has brought it about that Philemon is receiving him back as something much more dear than he ever was when he left.

Verses 15-16 are not, I believe, referring to manumission. Receiving Anesimus back as a brother did not mean that he ceased to be Philemon's slave. However, it would necessarily transform the way that Anesimus and Philemon treated each other from that point onwards.

As brothers in Christ, and in the new humanity in Christ also recognizing their common dignity as human beings more generally, the master-slave relationship would take on a very different form when occurring in the light of, and under the rule of, a much more fundamental reality. And at the heart of Paul's appeal is Paul's use of the work of Christ as a paradigm for his own appeal on Anesimus' behalf. So, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. In the Gospel, Christ, who was in the very form of God, took on the form of a servant, identifying with us so that we, as we are found in him, might enjoy his riches.

Paul stands between Anesimus and Philemon, assuming all of the burden of Anesimus' debts and wrongs, and offers himself as a guarantor for them. He identifies fully with Anesimus, so that glorious exchange can occur. Paul assumes Anesimus' debts, and Anesimus receives the welcome and the love that Paul himself would receive.

All of this rests upon the fellowship that we have in Christ, in which Christ has identified with us so that we can enjoy his riches. However, this fellowship between head and body also calls forth a fellowship within the body, whereby we identify with each other, in whatever condition we may find ourselves. Rich must identify with poor, masters with slaves, men with women, rulers with subjects.

All must take concern for the other. Was Paul expecting Anesimus to be released? Perhaps the key consideration here is the cryptic statement in verse 21. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

What is the even more than I say? I am not persuaded that manumission is primarily what Paul has in mind here. There was nothing wrong in principle in Paul's mind with a

Christian owning a slave, or a Christian slave serving a master. However, the Gospel necessarily transforms such situations, and provokes godly acts of gracious creativity and imagination.

Philemon's relationship with Anesimus could not be the same after this, and Paul is certain that Philemon receiving Anesimus back will provoke Philemon to consider ways that his relationship with Anesimus can become richer and more characterised by grace. One possibility is that he might send Anesimus to Paul, who clearly has found Anesimus to be of great assistance to him in his work, and has a deep affection for him as his son in the Gospel. Anesimus might then have accompanied Paul as he travelled, assisting him in the work of the Gospel.

The possibility that Anesimus is the Bishop of Ephesus mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch invites further speculation. But whatever happened, the Gospel clearly transforms the relationship between slave and master, placing it on a completely different footing, denying it the ultimacy that it enjoyed in pagan society, and placing it firmly under the rule of Christ's grace. A question to consider, how might Paul's pattern of appeal here be adopted by Christians in our mission to those on the margins of our societies?