

# For The Love of God

Philemon 1-25

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

13<sup>th</sup> February 2011

One day, just like any other, all the children at a Catholic elementary school were lined up for lunch. Following the strict routine of the nuns, they would pick up their trays and go through the line to get their lunch. At the end of the line, there was a long table, with a tray of chocolate chip cookies. The opposite end of the table, though, had a barrel stacked high with shiny, red and green apples.

As the children passed through the line, the nuns began to notice that the apples were disappearing more quickly than the cookies. They realized that the children were taking extra apples to stow away in their backpacks. To ensure that each child only took one apple, one of the nuns placed a sign next to the apples, saying, "Take only one apple. God is watching you."

The children became afraid and began taking only one apple. However, a third-grade boy decided to address this matter himself. In childlike handwriting, he wrote a note to put next to the cookies. "Take as many cookies as you want," the note said, "God is too busy watching the apples!"<sup>1</sup>

Do you have that feeling that God is watching you? Whatever you are doing? Wherever you are? Does it keep you from doing wrong things? Or, does it make you do right things? Because you know that God sees you?

Could that be why some of us are here in church this morning? Because we feel God is watching us and if we don't come to church, somehow, sometime, he'll get us. He will know if we play hooky, we believe, and there will be a day of reckoning. Fewer people feel like this, obviously, in our present-day, religiously-indifferent, secular times. Nonetheless, there are still those of us whose motive for being here today is because we feel God's eyes are watching us.

Then, again, besides feeling the eyes of God upon us, don't we have many other motives, apart from a desire to worship God, for being in church on a Sunday morning? Maybe we come to church out of habit bred in childhood years. Or the desire to gain brownie points in the eyes of others. Or a guilty feeling that we would let others down by our non-attendance. Or, the sense that our week is somehow not right if we don't start it in church.

The reasons for attending Sunday services are many and varied. As is also the case for our involvement in the broader area of the church's life and work, say, as elders, or serving on the Board, or singing in the choir. Why do we give of our time to teach in Sunday School or at the community kitchen or help out with *Bethlehem Live*? It all comes down, at the end of the day, to a question of motivation. What makes us do what we do?

As I watched events unfold in Egypt this past week,

motivation was a key issue that kept coming into my mind in terms of former President Mubarak's behaviour. Why did he keep holding on to power when he must have known early on that the game was lost. Using a sports analogy, even the most hardened Maple Leaf supporter would know that, if their team was down 10-0 to the Canadiens with a minute to go in the third period, they were definitely not going to win. But, though Mubarak was facing the same kind of no-win situation, he was reluctant to release his grip on power even when the writing was clearly on the wall.

Why? What was his motivation? He kept repeating in different speeches that he was doing what he was doing for the love of his country and for the love of his people. But as Nigeria's *Daily Trust* newspaper rightly pointed out, "True to the character trait of an oppressor dictator, Hosni Mubarak is undoubtedly motivated by self-love and self-love alone."<sup>2</sup> And that, being translated, means that he was really motivated, not by any patriotic love, nor by the love of a devout Moslem for Allah. No, he was motivated by a deep desire to leave behind an honourable legacy as the father of his nation, to be remembered as the saviour of the Egyptian people – and also, undoubtedly in no small measure, there was also the matter of his own personal immunity from prosecution in his post-presidential years, not to speak of preserving the huge \$40-70 billion fortune that reports say he had amassed over the years.

Now, if ex-president Mubarak was the model of a person motivated by self-love, we have in our Bible reading today the very reverse – someone who was not only the model of love for others but also love for God. St. Paul not only practised this highest form of love but encouraged others to act out of this motivation also. In fact, Paul makes such motivation the key issue in a short letter to his friend and co-worker<sup>3</sup>, Philemon, about an escaped slave called Onesimus. Philemon, who lived in Colossae,<sup>4</sup> was a man of high social position and also a convert of Paul's,<sup>5</sup> apparently occupying a very prominent position within the Christian community since we are told the church met in his house.<sup>6</sup>

Now, when Paul was in prison it seems he met Philemon's slave, Onesimus, and discovered the man had gone absent without leave. Like Philemon, Paul had also encouraged Onesimus to become a Christian<sup>7</sup> and, now counsels him to return to Philemon where he belongs. Without getting into the rights or wrongs of slavery, suffice it to say that Paul believes it would be best if slave and master were reconciled.

To smooth the way for this to happen, Paul writes a letter to Philemon recommending he accept Onesimus back without penalty. You could do it, Paul suggests, out of respect for my authority, or because I helped you become a

Christian, or because Onesimus is a fellow-Christian, or simply because he is useful. Actually, in offering this last option, we find a glint of Paul's humour – a pun in fact on Onesimus's name which in Greek means 'useful'. "At one time," says Paul to Philemon, "Onesimus was of no use to you but now he is both useful to you and me."<sup>8</sup>

Paul offers all these possible motives to persuade Philemon to do the right thing, the Christian thing, by taking the slave back. Finally, he appeals to him to do what he should do for the sake of love. From the motive of love.<sup>9</sup> Not as the *Good News* Bible says, "because I love you". Not because of Paul's love for Philemon. But, as most other versions translate this, "for love's sake"<sup>10</sup>, implying the love of God rather than human love. In other words, Paul is saying to Philemon, "For the love of God, receive back this wayward slave as a Christian brother. Forgive him and accept him back as part of your household once more."

For the love of God. The greatest of all motives. The power that has caused many people to do those things they would never otherwise have contemplated.

I wonder if you have ever heard of a Belgian woman called Madeleine Cinquin who died a couple of years back at the age of 99. Madeleine was educated at the Sorbonne in Paris where she obtained a degree in philosophy. She was a free spirit, a social butterfly, who enjoyed the fast life of the big city in the 1920s. But God had other plans for her and laid his hand upon her, causing her to take holy orders as a nun. As Sister Emmanuelle she taught well-off children in convent schools in places such as Istanbul.

When she was in her 60s, she suddenly felt called to leave the safe life of the convent and the education of the wealthy, and moved in 1971 to Cairo, Egypt, to the slum called Garbage City where for many years she lived and worked amongst the Zabaleen which means people of filth or rubbish – a huge community of thousands upon thousands of people who literally live in the city dump and make their living scavenging for things they can recycle and re-sell so they can buy food. A group of people whom, Mubarak, by the way, did nothing to help as he amassed his huge fortune – and one of the great behind-the-Cairo-scenes reasons for the recent uprising.<sup>11</sup>

"At 60 years old," says one writer, "Sister Emmanuelle (who was often referred to as Cairo's Mother Teresa) was living in a small hut with few possessions among the rotting garbage. She lived with little food, putting up with the hardships of the Zabaleen – worms in food supplies, fleas and disease. During her 22 years in Cairo's slums, Sister Emmanuelle did a great deal to improve life for Zabaleen, opening a school for children and for men, and a facility for youth called the Salam Centre in the slum of Mokkatam. (Then in the worst part of Garbage City), Ezbet El Nakhl, she set up a composting factory, which turned rubbish into fertilizer."<sup>12</sup>

And why did Sister Emmanuelle do what she did? For any self-serving reasons? For any glory she could obtain? To make a fortune? To protect her legacy? Hardly! She did

what she did for one simple reason. For love. For the love of others. For the love of the poorest of the poor in the world. For the love of God.

That very love should, of course, be the very motivation for all we do as Christians. For the love of God. The love seen in Jesus. That should also be the motivation for all we do here in St. Paul's. We should not do anything out of a sense of duty or habit – but because of God's love. We should not come on a Sunday morning to please the minister – but we should come because of God's love. We should not sing in the choir out of a sense of loyalty to the Music Director – but sing because of God's love. We should not help out with fund-raising events just to do our bit – but help because of God's love. We should not give money to the church just because it's the right thing to do – but give generously because of God's love.

As we consider the motives of other people for what they do in this life, let us examine our own motives. And, in coming days, let's make up our minds to act more intentionally and more purposefully out of the highest Christian motive possible. For the love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> From a story in "Getting To Know The Big Guy",

<http://withthelbiguy.wordpress.com>

<sup>2</sup> Issa Aremu, Reading Hosni Mubarak's Mind", *The Daily Trust*, 7 February 2011 <http://dailytrust.dailytrust.com>

<sup>3</sup> "To our friend and fellow worker" Philemon 1 [TEV]

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 4:9. Colossae or Colosse, a city of Phrygia, on the Lycus, a tributary of the Maeander, about 12 miles above Laodicea. It does not appear that Paul had visited this city when he wrote his letter to the church there (Col. 1:2). The modern town of Chonas or Chonum in Turkey occupies a site near its ruins. Easton's Bible Dictionary,

<http://www.ccel.org/e/easton/ebd/ebd.html>

<sup>5</sup> Philemon 19

<sup>6</sup> Philemon 2

<sup>7</sup> Philemon 10

<sup>8</sup> Philemon 11

<sup>9</sup> Philemon 9: "because I love you ..." Most other translations render this as "for love's sake" or "on the basis of love".

<sup>10</sup> KJV, NKJV, NRSV

<sup>11</sup> King Duncan, "A Labour of Love", *eSermons.com*, 2005; Sister Emmanuelle, [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

<sup>12</sup> Zoe Romanowsky, Sister Emmanuelle Dies at 99", [www.insidecatholic.com](http://www.insidecatholic.com)