

Reflection for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

"I, Paul, an old man," Letter of Paul to Philemon, verse 9

Reading and hearing these words in St. Paul's Letter to Philemon, I am reminded of an event that happened over 10 years ago when my dad was 80 years old. It was in the spring, and I was helping my dad repair his 20-year-old evaporative cooler. At the time I was feeling old going up and down the ladder, I was only in my late 40's but the ladder seemed to get longer every time I went up on the roof. My Dad, at the age of 80, stayed in the garage getting the parts ready that I would need on the roof. The last piece that I needed was a square piece of metal with a whole drilled through the center. I had measured what size hole that I needed and asked my dad to drill the hole while I prepared the area where this piece would go. I returned in about 45 minutes to take the piece up on the roof and install it on the evaporative cooler. I found my dad in the garage reading the newspaper drinking a glass of iced tea and eating cookies. In all fairness to my dad there was a glass of iced tea and a plate of cookies for me. But the piece of square metal did not have a hole in it. When I asked my dad why he had not drilled the hole in the metal, he looked at me and informed me that he was 80 years old. What could I say, so I drank my iced tea, ate the cookies, thanked my dad, and drilled the hole in the square piece of metal. As I went up onto the roof to finish the work on the evaporative cooler, I found myself thinking of St. Paul's statement in his letter to Philemon, *"I, Paul, an old man."*

The first four words of our Second Reading this Sunday, makes a statement on its own, and can create a great deal of reflection. St. Paul was born in the year 5 AD in Tarsus and was a martyr for Christ in Rome in the year 64 AD. He wrote his letter to Philemon when he was in prison in Rome in the year 62 AD. The letter to Philemon was written to encourage him to accept back the runaway slave, Onesimus, and to treat him as he would treat Paul. This letter is rather short only 25 verses long, but one can sense that St. Paul when he wrote it he was feeling his age and the weight of his ministry, of sharing the good news and calling the followers of Christ to a closer relationship with God, in their daily lives.

St. Paul, who was 59 when he gave his life for Christ, was 57 years old when he wrote his letter to Philemon about his concern for Onesimus, and he stated *"I, Paul, an old Man."* It is in some ways hard to believe that at 57 years old, St. Paul considered himself an old man. But considering the journey he had taken and the fact that he was a prisoner for Christ, it does make sense that he might consider himself old at the age of 57. Also, in the time that St. Paul lived the average life span of a male in the Rome Empire was 35 years. Of course, the first Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar lived from 63 BC to 14 AD, 76 years, but that was not the norm. It was also not uncommon for males in the first century, in the Roman Empire to live to the age 50. This could also explain St. Paul calling himself an old man, for many of the people that he grown up with had already passed away and when he looked around at his world at the age of 57, most of the people around him were younger than he was. For us today 57 or even 59 does not seem that old. Today the average man in Italy lives to the age of 81, the average man in Israel lives to the age of 80. So clearly by today's standards St. Paul would not be able to call himself old at the age of 57 or even 59. I guess maybe if my dad wishes to call himself old at the age of 80 or 90, he clearly has a right to do so. But please note I have not called my dad old, and it was not me but him who pointed out over 10 years ago that he was 80 years old. Just keeping the record straight and myself out of trouble.

The information provided in our first reading this Sunday can help us better understand our Gospel Reading taken from the Gospel of Luke. It is in this reading we hear Jesus say, *"If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* We can define hate as; *to dislike greatly, to have a great aversion to, it is less than abhorrent or detesting.* But normally if we looked for a definition of hate for the word used in the Bible the definition of the word is *to signify loving less.* The Biblical definition of hate truly can help us better

understand what Jesus is saying to the crowds in our Gospel reading this Sunday, that for us to follow Christ, we must be willing to place Him first and foremost in our lives. We must love Him with our whole heart, our whole soul, and our entire being.

St. Paul's letter to Philemon can seem strange for a 57-year-old man to call himself an "old man" in the year 2025 when the average man in Italy lives to the at 81. In the time of St. Paul when the average man in the Roman Empire, lived to the age of 35, it makes perfect sense that St. Paul would give himself the title of "old man." It is also helpful to use the Biblical definition of the word "hate" and not the secular definition of the word "hate" in our Gospel Reading this Sunday. For we are called to make Christ our priority in our lives as His followers. This is what St. Paul was pointing out to Philemon in our Second Reading this Sunday.