

Sunday 6 May 2018

Friendship - John 15 v9-17

What is the opposite of friend? Is it stranger, or is it enemy? If it's stranger then friendship is essentially all about familiarity. If it's enemy, then friendship is about someone being on our side.

There's a difference between a friend simply being someone we know and like and a friend being someone from whom we expect something-support, or backing, or good advice.

On this Parry anniversary weekend, we celebrate his music, but, part of his influence came through the number of friendships he built up throughout his life as he threw himself into performance, national musical culture and the development of his many students.

One of the worst things that can be said of someone is that they have no friends. It suggests isolation and unfriendliness and inadequacy of personality of some sort. And yet, friendship is fickle. On social media people can easily start to get fixated about how many people like what they've posted, how many friends they have on Facebook. Comparisons arise, and people get jittery if they don't have as many friends as they did. Who are these friends anyway? Are they really people we would turn to in a crisis?

We know that one of the trials about moving homes and jobs is that we lose touch with people who have been friends, who have been with us, who we've got to know well and liked.

In the gospel for today it's striking that Jesus is calling his disciples friends rather than servants. He does that, he says, because he has taken them into his confidence and made known to them all that he knows of God. A servant, by contrast, doesn't know what the master is about or really like, just follows instructions and hopes to get it right.

We know that good friendships have to be maintained. We need to keep in touch. It's remarkable how friendships can be picked up after gaps of years, isn't it, but, even so, there's quite a bit of re-establishing of common ground and sometimes trust to check out.

But what of making friends in the first place? Aelred of Rievaulx, who wrote on spiritual friendship in the 12th century had this to say about setting up friendships:

'One should pay attention to the 4 steps which lead up to the heights of perfect friendship; for a friend ought first to be selected, next tested, then finally admitted, and from then on treated as a friend deserves. And speaking of selection, we exclude the quarrelsome, the irascible, the fickle, the suspicious and the talkative; and yet not all, but only those who are unwilling or unable to restrain these passions. If these impulses are not restrained we can fall into those vices, by which friendship, as scripture says, is wounded and dissolved; namely, insults, reproaches, betrayal of secrets, pride and the stroke of treachery.'

Friendship, of course, runs through many types of relationship, in marriage, partnerships, at work, at school, in clubs and societies. They can be great, and they can go horribly wrong.

We're told that our friendships should be open, honest and repairable. In fact, what we really like about good friendships is a parallel with what Jesus says in the reading. Servants and masters have a contractual relationship. There's a job to be done and two people play their part. With friendship it's different. We're opening ourselves up to someone, and it's mutual, and we make ourselves more vulnerable. Less easily can we hide our foibles, likes

and dislikes, manner of speaking and behaving. Friendship develops as we build up a more rounded picture of someone and we can sometimes see what they can't see about themselves, because they've opened themselves up to us –and vice-versa.

This, of course, is at the heart of what Jesus is offering us in calling us his friends. He offers himself as the holy one of God, as we offer to him our prayers. He is someone who has shown his vulnerability in his life and especially his death, and is present to us risen from the dead that we might open ourselves to him and for him. It's worth reflecting on the nature of our Lord as a friend. We tend to think of him as a teacher, showing us what we need to do, and then testing us out when we try to follow what we ought to do. Friendship is different.

As Michael Perham says in his book on Jesus and Peter:

'A Jesus who desires our friendship and offers us his, who looks for mutuality and cannot hide vulnerability, may seem wonderfully attractive. It may speak to the deep longing in our heart. We may find ourselves saying, "yes, to really know his friendship –yes, to really be God's friend....yes, that's what I need above all else, and I hadn't understood it". But in friendship with Jesus, as with all friendship, we can't quite know where it might lead us. It might change a lot in our lives'.

In Jesus' time, friendship was generally understood as being for mutual advantage. Your friend was someone who brought you some kind of benefit, socially or materially, Jesus really brings a new definition of friendship in what he says and does. Calling the disciples his friends isn't done because it sounds nice and warm and open. It's because Jesus is redefining it. It's about mutual love and service, unconditional friendship that doesn't have an eye on some benefit. It's about eating together and sharing together and supporting each other because the friendship matters.

Many have proclaimed this. Toy Story taught it to a whole generation of children. *'we'll stick together and see it through, cos you've got a friend in me'*.

Aelred of Rievaulx put it like this:

'A friend is the medicine of life. For medicine is not more powerful for our wounds in all our temporal needs than the possession of a friend, who meets every misfortune joyfully so that they bear one another's burdens. Even more, each one carries their own injuries even more lightly than that of their friend. Friendship therefore heightens the joys of prosperity and mitigates the sorrows of adversity, by dividing and sharing them. Hence, the best medicine in life is a friend.'

'You are my friends if you do what I command you' says Jesus in John. That doesn't sound like the kind of friendship I've described. I'll be your friends if you do what I tell you! That is conditional friendship. There is an irony here. We are commanded by Jesus to do what he asks. Yet he doesn't compel us. He has authority, and yet he is the vulnerable friend. He has set out his teaching but he isn't going to test us on it; he walks with us as a friend through all that we try to do in his name and all that we experience with him.

If we do what Jesus command us, we will be a friend to others - offering a mutual love and service –and we will be a friend to him, and he will be the faithful friend we had hoped for.

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