

HYMNS: **372** “Come down, O love divine”
 543 “Wonders of wonders”
 736` “In heavenly love abiding”
 531 “ What a friend we have in Jesus”
 334 “Praise to the holiest in the height”

READINGS: Acts 10L44-48
 John 15:9-17

“I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS”

This is a phrase that we heard in our reading from John. Not long before his crucifixion, Jesus had a long conversation with his disciples – his final opportunity to talk to them about the important things for his ministry and mission and for theirs after his departure. “I do not call you servants any longer but I call you friends.”

Jesus said it to his disciples then but he says the same thing to us now to us – he calls each of us ‘friend’ and wants a relationship with us. That is something pretty significant – Jesus calls us friends.

Our understanding of what this means will be greatly influenced by our experience of human friendships and what we understand by the word, ‘friend.’ It is not something we reflect upon often, I think, we tend to take the concept and the people pretty much for granted. So let us do some reflection now.

‘Friendship’ is usually a very positive word. Experts say that people who have a strong network of friends are more likely to be physically and mentally healthy, some say that people with friends live longer.

We do need to be aware, however, that some relationships that pass as ‘friendship’ are not wholesome and positive. We have heard a lot recently about people who ‘groom’ others, especially young and vulnerable people with a view to exploiting them. There is also the fact that in many gangs the members feel themselves to be close friends – often because of a lack of friendship in their families – and feel themselves bound together in loyalty but a loyalty which causes negative and often violent reactions to those considered ‘outsiders’.

Nevertheless in daily usage ‘friendship’ is a positive term. Most people want to be good friends and to have good friends. Think of your friends, think of one particular friend – what is it that made you friends and keeps you friends?

Is it that you have known each other for a long time and have many shared interests and experiences? Is it that you have a trusting relationship in which you can share your feelings without fear of judgement or ridicule? Is it that you know that when you have a problem or need advice you can email or ring them and know they will respond with a listening ear? Is your friend someone who cares about you in the same way that you care for them – a relationship where there is reciprocity and mutuality?

Some aspects of modern life – especially modern urban life – put strains on friendships. Pressure on time from work commitments can mean that people really have to intentionally make time in their diaries to meet their friends. Some married couples lead such frenetic lives that they have to put times to talk into their diaries, especially if circumstances demand that they work and live in different places.

Modern media are a mixed blessing, too – skype and email mean that people living at great distances on different continents can keep in touch regularly – that can only be a good thing. But then there are social networking sites - their impact is far more ambiguous. It is said that people have hundreds or even thousands of 'friends' on Facebook. What sort of friendship is that especially when people can be 'befriended' and unfriended' at the click of a button. In my estimation that sort of phenomenon has really caused a devaluing of the concept of 'friend.' Can you really be a friend with someone that you have never met or spoken to face-to-face?

I read a disturbing article in the paper yesterday about the present generation of young people, especially boys, some of whom live in their bedrooms playing video games, communicating on social networking sites or watching porn. They rarely interact with other human beings and are depriving themselves of learning the skills of relating to other people. Such a situation bodes ill for relationships between boys and girls, men and women.

Friendship requires time, being together, working on shared tasks. We cannot be a friend alone – a friendship, by definition is a relationship.

The theologian, Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God* discusses the characteristics of friendship in biblical and theological terms. She emphasises that friendship does not arise from necessity – it is something we enter into freely. Friendship is based on disinterested love – a love that is not looking for advantage to be gained from being with the other person. That is why manipulative relationships between adults and vulnerable young people are not friendships.

Friendship forms strong bonds and the betrayal of a friend ranks as one the most dastardly and disloyal deeds. Strong friendships formed in the trenches of the First World War lead, so often, to heroic acts from one soldier to another.

The poet, Dante, reserves the inner circle of hell for those who betrayed their friends – Brutus and Cassius but also Judas, the betrayer of Jesus.

So let us return to the passage with which we started. Jesus knew his end was near. He needed to impart the most important messages to his disciples. So Jesus told his disciples that he loved them, in the same that he was loved by his Father, God. Jesus then told his disciples that they should love one another and that meant acting in a loving way to each other, even to the point of laying down their lives.

Then he told them, if you follow my words you are my friends. How would those disciples have heard and understood these words? The common verb for 'love' in the Greek is 'phileo' and the Greek word for friend, 'philos', comes from this verb. So, in the language of the New Testament 'a friend' is understood as 'one who loves.' In our own times when the concept of 'friend' is in danger of being devalued, we need to

reassert this fundamental connection between love and friendship, utmost concern and friendship, care and friendship.

One other fundamental of friendship which is important for understanding the friendship which John is speaking about is the concept of 'frank speech' – telling it as it is, not as the friend might like to hear. If a person engages only in flattering speech then they are not really your friends. Politicians have a problem here – they, in the main, like to hear flattering words – but those who utter such words are not their true friends.

For Jesus' disciples and for us Jesus is both a model of friendship and a source of friendship.

Jesus asked those who sought to follow him to love as he had loved. His life and ministry had been an enacted parable of what that meant – bringing in the outsider, including the marginalised, offering encouragement to the down-hearted, offering healing to the sick, compassion to those who had been disregarded and giving all the possibility of a new quality of life – life in abundance.

And Jesus enacted the ancient ideal of friendship – he lay down his life for his friends. Jesus' whole life was an incarnation of the ideal of friendship. Jesus did not just talk the talk, he walked the walk.

Jesus is the model of friendship and Jesus is also the source of friendship. Jesus makes it possible that we are friends to others through the relationship of friendship that he offers us.

In this passage from John, Jesus states that his followers become his friends to the extent that they keep his commandment of love in their lives.

In John 15:14 it appears that friendship with Jesus is still conditional, 'you are my friends **if** you do what I command.' But in the next verse that condition seems to be removed – 'I do not call you servants any longer but I have called you friends.' What accounts for this change? Well, not anything the disciples have done – there has been no time for that – but through what Jesus has done – 'I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' Jesus has spoken to his disciples frankly and openly. In sharing everything Jesus enables the disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of God the Father.

This intimacy can be seen most clearly in the foot-washing story in John 13. The foot-washing is a sacrament of friendship. Jesus assumes the role of a servant – giving a tangible example of what love means. Plain and honest speaking is another essential characteristic of Jesus' friendship with us. Jesus' commandment to love as he has loved would seem completely beyond our grasp if it were not for the character of Jesus' friendship with us. He has asked us to enter into a frank and honest relationship with him – to be his friend.

We can only be his friend if we trust and respect him, we can only be his friend if we are continually in touch – through prayer, in worship and in reading the Scriptures. We can only be his friend if we are honest and open with Jesus and allow him to be

open and honest with and about us. The burden of our own shortcomings are too great unless we share them with Jesus our friend.

Friendship with Jesus is not something that can be forced upon us, not something that we can be compelled into – that would be a contradiction in terms. Friendship with Jesus is something that we enter into freely – having felt his hand of friendship reach out to us.

And so, in response, we sing

“What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.