

Friends...

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John 15vv9-17

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other. (John 15vv9-17)

The word ‘friend’ or ‘friends’ is mentioned in the NT alone 71 times. On 23 of those occasions it is Jesus who is speaking the word. And it is He of all people who elevates friendship to almost unimaginable level when He uses it in our reading today to describe those who achieve all that God would want of them. **“I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends...”** It would perhaps be easier to comment on friendship from the scripture before this where Jesus seems to provide a simple black and white description of friendship... **‘You are my friends if you do what I command...’** since this would allow us to place clear careful boundaries around it so that we might delineate exactly what requirements friendship placed on us. This is always our instinct from the religious side. Make sure we know what’s in and what’s out. Carefully boundary the love of God so that we make sure we don’t have to do any more work than is required to ‘make the grade.’

This would, however, be to make a law out of what is clearly not meant to be one. It is much more instructive to spend a few moments contemplating what this passage might mean from God’s side. What does this tell us about God? Well it tells us that for God friendship is incredibly important. It tells us, moreover, that friendship with us is incredibly important! And, furthermore, it tells us how important it is. You see if Jesus is prepared to sum up all that He has done with and for the disciples in terms of this one word it must be the case that, somehow, this word encapsulates the very love of God.

¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends...

The whole aim, it would seem, of Christ’s work with the disciples has been to get to this exalted state where, amazingly, He might call them His **friends!** What’s more, if this has been the aim of His work with these first followers we can be pretty sure that this is also His aim for the Church and, finally, if it His aim for the Church it is His aim for you and I! Jesus wants to be a friend to me. Indeed, His highest aim is that I might know Him as a friend.

So what does this mean for you and I? What does it mean that the Son of God on behalf of God has come to earth to make us friends? What does it mean that the epitome of relationship with God is friendship?

I don't know about you but for me this word just breaks open everything I would normally have associated with being religious or spiritual. I mean what on earth does friendship have to do with being spiritual? How can being religious and being friends be related? For most men friendship has more to do with being able to laugh together at a joke which has a slightly or even more than slightly dodgy side. Of course we Christian men don't do that anymore... at least not in public. And for women friendship is about being able to share what's really important with someone who listens and understands. It's about rehearsing life with another human being; sharing life together – at least that's how it looks from a male vantage point! But again, is this religious? Is this spiritual?

If one were being particularly nasty and deep one could almost accuse Jesus of making a category mistake in this passage. This was a term introduced by British philosopher and Christian Gilbert Ryle to indicate cases where we talk of something in terms appropriate only to something of a radically different kind. So we attribute to something a quality it cannot possibly have. So if I say 'my father is in Dunedin and my son is in America but where is my family' I am making a category mistake because I am attributing to the word 'family' a physical and geographical quality it only possesses arbitrarily or occasionally – I have placed it in a category of physical objects to which it does not belong.

And it would seem, wouldn't it, that Jesus has done the same thing when he refers not only to His disciples as friends but to the height, the epitome of discipleship in terms of... friendship? I mean what are we trying to do here? Are we not trying to convert the world? Are we not trying to make a stand against the world? Isn't our reputation meant to be one of holiness and righteousness? And yes, I can understand that we need to keep good relations within the church – that's fine. But to sum up a disciple's best efforts in terms of friendship... couldn't Jesus have chosen a better descriptor?

And, of course, He had already been slandered by this very term because friendship was at the centre of the accusation that that plagued His whole ministry – '**this man is a friend to... sinners.**' So you'd think the guy would learn wouldn't you? Stay away from the friendship deal. That's not who we are. We have to be on guard. We have to be defensive. We have to be strong. Not fraternising with the enemy and not being seen as being smoochy with each other.

One way of understanding what it means that Jesus is my friend is to hang everything on those words that sound very much like an ultimatum or a law...

¹⁴**'You are my friends if you do what I command.'**

But this won't do either exegetically or emotionally. In the first place this must be read in context – these words relate to the passage around them where Jesus is emphasising not a mechanical obedience to law but a relationship of love both with God and with one's fellow Christians. And His reference point is not obedience but His own love for these disciples who will, in just a few short hours, all desert Him. And what is His reaction to this betrayal? It is to return to them and to reassure them of His love and to help them regain a sense of being valued before He leaves them and returns to the Father. So while obedience is important it is not the final thing.

To turn friendship into a legal exercise in the face of the surrounding verses would be to distort the whole passage and to ignore the witness of Christ in many other situations in the Gospels. For He was a friend to many and this wasn't a mechanical 'I am your friend because I have to be' exercise. Jesus' emotions were involved. He wept with and for His friends. He grieved over their rejection of Him and He rejoiced in their company. Jesus was into being a friend...

So what we are left with is the startling idea that friendship is, for God, of the highest of spiritual values, representing not just a normal close relationship between people but encapsulating a deep and significant spiritual truth. Somehow, friendship defines not just a good relationship and not just the desires of Jesus but... God in Godself. The highest quality, the highest one can attain to as a follower of Christ is found, somehow, in this word... **friend!**

Which leads us, in the first place at least, to think of the Church and to ask ourselves – is this is how we are known? Are we known as doyens of friendship? Are we known for the quality of our friendships both in and outside of the Church? Is this how our ministry might be characterised; is this what we appear to be good at? Are we known as a group of friends? Are we known as people who treat each other as friends, who stick together, who love each other even at our worst?

I must confess to you today that if I were to answer these questions personally I would fall considerably short. I struggle to remain friends with those who are not friends towards me. I struggle to devote significant resource to friendships and I have often let down people who I know thought of me as a friend.

And somehow, at least at times, my faith has not helped me in this struggle. I am often tempted to dismiss friendship. After all, what eternal value is this compared say, to preaching, or to leading or to... cleaning up around the house? Aren't there priorities in life? Don't we simply have to get some things done? So why does Jesus seem to be so in to friendship?

C S Lewis once said this of friendship, '**Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.**' Perhaps this offers just a hint of why God values friendship so highly. Perhaps more than our mere survival God's interest lies in how we survive, in how we live, in how we serve, in how we love...

I don't know about you but if Church becomes a place just of the survival of faith I suspect we've missed the point. Faith is about abundant life, abundant grace, abundant Truth and this is perhaps something that friendship lends to ordinary human living – an abundance even, perhaps, a wastefulness that resonates with the willingness of God to 'waste' His only Son on us.

And this wastefulness, this friendship, is a mark of the Church – it is clearly how Jesus intended that His disciples should be known and, through them, the Church. It is a treasure, a taonga of the Church – that we are friends of Jesus and that we should be friends with one another.

So have a look at each other friends. Have a look and ponder. Jesus intends that our community should be a friendship and should be expressed as a friendship. Yes, first with God but always, always also with one another. And if we struggle to be friends with others then ask God to help you. He is, after all, the ultimate friend!