

How we relate to others: Nurturing friendships

Conventional wisdom says there's nothing better than a friend, unless it's a friend with chocolate. I think I could probably agree with that! Good friends are invaluable – and I count myself lucky to have had several good friends over the years, the sort of friends that you can go many months without seeing, but then, when you get together, it's as if no time has passed at all. Or friends that you know you can ring whatever the time of day or night - when you've got a problem that you need to talk through or a need for some practical help - and you know they'd be there for you in an instant. Anyone else got friends like that? Friends that don't need to say much, but just knowing that they're there is what matters. I love this quote from Winnie the Pooh:

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

'Pooh?' he whispered.

'Yes, Piglet?'

'Nothing,' said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. *'I just wanted to be sure of you.'*

I wonder if you have a special friend and, if so, why that person means so much to you. What is it about their friendship that makes it so special? (Talk with the person next to you for a minute or two).

There's no doubt that a good friend is someone who accepts you unconditionally for who you are; is someone you can be yourself with; lifts you when you're feeling down, sometimes just by their mere presence; makes you laugh; and is someone who tells you the truth. A friend is someone who knows nearly everything about you and still stands by you. We sang that wonderful hymn *'What a friend we have in Jesus'* at the start of our service – and we do have a wonderful friend in him – but we also need that friendship to be made flesh too.

Last week, I had the privilege of sharing communion in a care home with a chap who is at the end stage of Motor Neurone Disease. He's completely bedridden and can do very little for himself. It's very difficult to understand his speech but he has a faith and he still wants to receive communion. But the best thing is that this chap has a wonderful friend who has visited him faithfully in the care home for the last 3 years, and who makes sure he is there when we take communion, so that he and his friend can receive together. On Wednesday, during communion, we read the Bible passage from 1 Corinthians 13 that we heard read in church last week – that passage about love, and we

thanked God for the friendship of love between these two chaps. People often ask *'Where is God?'* in such situations, but it was plain to see that God was there in the hand of his friend, his presence saying very clearly *'Here I am.'*

Friendship is a key that fits the lock of Christian faith almost perfectly. Friendship runs through every bit of God's Big Story. It's there right at the beginning in Genesis – that great book written by Moses to describe the nature of God to the people of Israel. Stories told after their flight from Egypt to remind the people why they were special to God. In the second creation story in Genesis 2 having made man, God says: *'It is not good that the man should be alone.'* And God blesses Adam with a partner. A partner who can be his best friend. Friendship right there at the beginning. Friendship with each other but also friendship with God – that image of Adam and Eve wandering the garden casually bumping into God as he walked in the cool of the day. But then it goes wrong. They mess up and are banished from the garden. The special friendship with God changes.

The story of Israel thereafter is of a people trying to be friends with God – times when they follow God's law and things go well, and times when they don't. But then God sends Jesus, the best, best friend ever. The whole Bible narrative – the whole story – can be seen as God searching out his people in order to bring them back into friendship, the friendship that from his side never changed.

And then comes Jesus, for whom friendship was really important. He gathered a small group of friends, both male and female, and took them with him for the time of their lives. They would have spent many hours walking the hills and paths of Galilee, chatting, joking, barbecuing on the beach. A young man with his friends, purposeful and focused, but also enjoying the riches and rewards of friendship. And he was specific about his relationship with them. In our gospel reading today, he says *'I have called you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you.'* He had shared everything with his friends, as friends do. And now he laid down his life for his friends, just as he said he would.

And, after his death, resurrection and ascension, the story of friendship goes on. It follows that the Church, which inevitably came into being after his departure, should be a network of the friends of Jesus – whether they were friends who'd known Jesus personally while he lived and walked on earth, or had become friends in his risen life. Being friends who love each other is of

utmost importance to Jesus. What does he say to his friends before he leaves them? *'Love each other.'* And earlier in John's gospel – *'A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this – by your love of each other – everyone will know that you are my disciples, when they see the love you have for each another.'*

And friendship will be there right at the end of times – in the new creation – when we will all be friends forever.

So, if friendship is so important, why do Christians fall out so much? There are lots of examples in the Bible of friendships going wrong. Probably the most famous of fallings-out was between Paul and Barnabas. On their first missionary journey together, John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, accompanied them. Along the way, however, John Mark decided to return to his home in Jerusalem but we're not told why. Later on, when a second campaign was planned, Barnabas proposed taking Mark as a helper, but Paul was against the idea. Acts 15 tells us that they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia.

And there's the falling out between Euodia and Syntyche, women church leaders at Philippi. We have no idea what the disagreement was about but we get the sense that it wasn't about the church flowers! It was something serious, serious enough for Paul to mention it in his letter to the Philippians and to tell them to sort it out: *'I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up,'* he writes. *'God doesn't want his children holding grudges.'* And why? Because unresolved conflict isn't healthy at any level. And it isn't attractive to unbelievers. How will people know we're Jesus' disciples? By our love for one another. Writing to another church - in Ephesus this time - that was also struggling with relationships, Paul writes, *'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.'*

So, if it's human nature for us to struggle with friendship, what could we do differently? Well, we could ask ourselves if we're doing the most we can to maintain good friendships? Are we doing enough to both value and nurture relationships that are important to us? Some people are much better at this than others. They are just better at maintaining contact in the gaps between meetings. They send texts, cards and emails and let you know they are thinking about you. But, if we're not someone naturally gifted in this way, then these

are skills we could practise and aim to get better at. It's worth going out of our way to maintain friendships, not only to avoid us slipping into isolation, but also because it's part of the divine ecology: *'It's not good for man or woman to be alone.'*

Something else we can do is change the way we see ourselves as church. John Pritchard, in his book *'Living Faithfully'* urges us *not* to see church as an institution, but first and foremost as a network of friends - friends of each other and friends of God. The most important thing is to be God's friend. And to be God's friends together can be so exciting! The best experience of church surely has to be church where Jesus is at the centre, living in his friends as he said he would, and empowering each and every one of us to live his abundant life – for ourselves and for the community around. And then, when we disagree, because there's always going to be stuff we disagree on – to be kind to one another!

And lastly, we try to be the best friends that we can be, to be simply present with one another, knowing that often we won't have the right word for the moment. Henri Nouwen, Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian said this about friends, a great quote to end with:

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. That is a friend who really cares.