

Sermon 7 October Friends

John 15:9-13

Where would we be without friends? I think friends are especially relevant today - with increasing break-down of the fabric of the family young people are more and more turning to friends for emotional support, and even to some extent, their identity. Friends give us security; they act as an emotional buffer for those times when the vagaries of life unsettle our smooth waters.

What do we want from a friend? Loyalty, a sympathetic ear, someone who has got time for us, someone to be always there for us. Someone once said, 'Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I might not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend.'

A friend is someone who will do what they can to ease our pain to make us feel comfortable, to make us feel good. There is the story of a Year 10 class at school in California that made headlines when the boys in a class decided by themselves to shave their heads. They did so, without embarrassment, because one of their own developed cancer and had undergone chemotherapy. His hair began to fall out. To make their friend feel at home, to feel one with the crowd, all the classmates agreed to shave their head, with their parents' permission, so that upon his return, he would not stand out from the rest of the class. The teacher was so moved by the spirit of the class that he too shaved his head.

A friend is someone who will stand by us through thick and thin. Jackie Robinson was the first black to play Major League baseball. Breaking baseball's colour barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he made a mistake. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then one of his teammates standing nearby came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Jackie later said, that arm around his shoulder saved his career.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that they are now his friends. This is a great compliment and there is some background to this. There was a custom in place at the courts of the Roman emperors and also the eastern kings whereby there was a very select group of men called *the friends of the king*, or *the friends of the emperor*. At all times they had access to the king or the emperor. They even had the right to come to his sleeping quarters at the beginning of the day. He talked to them before he talked to his generals and his statesmen.

So Jesus calls us to be his friends and God's friends. That is a tremendous offer, the offer of a very close and intimate relationship. And that is what being a friend is all about. Friends are gold.

As a friend, Jesus made that supreme sacrifice, and as he said, this is the ultimate mark of a friend. Let me finish with a story about a soldier in the trenches during the First World War. He saw his friend out in no man's land, stumble and fall in a hail of bullets. He said to his officer, 'Sir, may I go and bring him in?' But the officer refused. He said, 'No one can live out there. I would only lose you as well.' Disobeying the order, the soldier went to try and save his friend. Somehow he got his friend on to his shoulder and staggered back to the trenches. By the time he got back his friend was dead and he also had received a wound in his shoulder.

The officer was angry. He said, 'I told you not to go. Your friend is dead and now you have been wounded. It was not worth it.' The soldier replied, 'No, Sir, it was worth it. You see, when I got to him, he said, "Jim, I knew you would come for me."'

