

Sermon 3 October 2021 Friends

John 15:9-13

I want to say a few words about friends. Where would we be without friends? I think friends are especially relevant today. I say that on two levels. Firstly, with the increasing breakdown of the family fabric, young people are more and more turning to friends for emotional support, and even to some extent, their identity.

Secondly, in today's lockdown environment it is good to have someone you can really share your frustration with; someone you can open up to and let off a bit of steam. That's what good friends are for – they act as an emotional buffer in those times when the vagaries of life unsettle our smooth waters.

What we want from a friend is a sympathetic ear, someone who empathises with us and doesn't feel that they need to give us a gentle lecture. We know how we should be feeling but at times it is good to just give vent to how we really are feeling and to have that accepted and affirmed.

A friend is 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 in California that made headlines when the boys in the class decided by themselves to shave their heads. They did so because one of their classmates developed cancer and had undergone chemotherapy. His hair began to fall out. To make their friend feel comfortable, to feel one with the crowd, all the classmates agreed to shave off their hair. The teacher was so moved by the spirit of the class that he too shaved off his hair.

A friend is someone who will stand by us through thick and thin. Jackie Robinson was the first black player 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 jeer him. He stood at second base feeling humiliated. Then one of his teammates 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. I am sure you have a friend who right now could do with an arm around the shoulder.

In our 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 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 private 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. That is what being a friend is all about.

In our reading Jesus tells us, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Jesus, of course, did just this. Could we be expected to do the same?

There is the well-known story of 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 daid 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 friends 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.'

Perhaps we cannot be expected to actually put our lives on the line for friends, certainly on a regular basis. But we can be expected to make sacrifices, and there is a myriad of ways we can do that. Friends are gold. We need to appreciate them, and most importantly, ensure that we ourselves are worthy friends. Someone said, '*A faithful friend is the medicine of life.*'

I want to finish with another quote which I think is delightful. '*A friend is one who overlooks your broken fence and admires the flowers in your garden.*'

Reverend Warner Wilder