

Sermon 15 September 2024 Friends

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 John 15:9-13

I want to say a few words about friends. Where would we be without friends? What is interesting in the context of our church, in the context of us as members of that church, in the context of us who would like to take pride in the label of Christians, is that what we seek, expect and want from our friends is just what we should be giving out to others as we interact, and in our own way, minister to those around us. It is in this context that my few words will be framed.

Just as an aside, as an observation, I think friends are especially relevant today for young people. With the apparent increasing fragility of the family fabric, young people are more and more turning to friends for emotional support, and even to some extent, their identity.

Anyway, on with the issue of friendship in the context of our ministry to those around us. 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.

It is called listening and listening can be a most encouraging and affirming thing you can do for anyone. When you listen to someone, you are giving them a very positive message – you are giving them a very precious commodity (time) and you are actually expressing an interest in them. That can be extremely affirming.

Forgive me, but I do want to share with you an experience I had many years ago in my role as a school chaplain, an experience which brought home to me the power of listening. I need to say at the outset that I certainly do not profess to be a good listener, far from it.

On this occasion, a boy came to see. He was dealing with a problem at home and he wanted to talk about it. So for the next hour he talked about it. I just listened, I didn't say a word, mainly because I wasn't too sure what advice to give him, and so I kept my mouth shut. When he had finished talking, one hour later, he got up, shook my hand and said, 'Thank you, Rev, for your help.' I was a little gob-smacked because I wasn't aware that I had given him any help whatsoever. And then it occurred to me, that just by sitting there and listening, I had, quite inadvertently, not only helped him get something off his chest but also given him a very positive message. I had affirmed him. It was a huge lesson for me. Whether I have learned from it is quite another matter!

Bryant McGill, author and social media influencer, wrote, '*One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.*' It's important we don't underestimate the power of listening. It's important we don't underestimate the effectiveness and importance of listening as a tool of ministry, as a way of implementing the commandment to 'love our neighbour.' It's actually not always the easiest thing to do but each one of us has the ability and the power within us to do it, and believe me, you will make a difference. It's something we invariably do as friends, so let us be friends to all those who come into our presence.

So continuing with the theme of friendship as a way of reaching out to others. A friend is someone who 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 may 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 had begun 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 that by the spirit of the class that he too shaved off his hair.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that they are now his friends: *'You are my friends, if you do what I command you.'* 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 '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, and that should be the basis of the relationship we endeavour to have with those around us. If Jesus can call us to be his friends, why can we not extend the same invitation to those around us?

I want to refer briefly to our reading from Ecclesiastes, and I quote from the first two verses of the reading: *'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other.'* The writer makes it quite clear that we all need to someone to lean on when times are tough, someone to support and lift us up. 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 we all know someone right now who could do with an arm around the shoulder.

I leave the last word on friends to Winnie the Pooh: *'A day without a friend is like a pot without a single drop of honey left inside.'*