



John Wesley
Wesley's Chapel
& Leysian Mission

Sunday May 6th

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS:	277	"My song is love unknown"
	595	"Lord we have come at your own invitation"
	503	"Love, divine, all loves excelling"
	569	"An Upper Room did our Lord prepare"
	531	"What a friend we have in Jesus"

READINGS Acts 10:44-48
John 15: 9-17

"FRIENDSHIP – A SCHOOL OF CHRISTIAN LOVE"

Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants but friends."

He is speaking to his disciples, trying to prepare them for the time after his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, trying to prepare them for their mission once he is no longer physically with them.

Jesus called his first disciples, 'friends' and he calls his followers down the ages by that same word. He calls us, 'friends'.

Recent circumstances have caused me to think a lot about friends and friendship. In early April I travelled to North Yorkshire to a Memorial Service for a friend I had taught with in Zambia in the early 1970s. I had also been her bridesmaid. She had died in Spain – most of her friends had not been able to go to the funeral there, so we gathered in her home village, from around Europe to say goodbye and scatter her ashes. I had not seen some of my other colleagues for 20 or 30 years but we fell back into easy conversation and the years rolled away. We were good friends.

Two weeks ago I met up in a reunion with 8 of my fellow students from University days in Durham in the 1960s. Our ways had diverged after university and we did not see each other often – yet we had no difficulty in recapturing our earlier friendship.

In both cases we had spent a lot of time together as our friendships formed. We talked a lot in those early days, shared our joys, our challenges and our sorrows. Our friendship was deeply rooted in shared experiences.

If I look at you, the congregation here at Wesley's Chapel – I see you as friends. When I think of how we have become friends I see the same thing – shared time together and shared conversation. Especially at life-changing times – births and baptisms, marriage and funerals we have come to know each other more deeply. Often it has been preparation for these rites of passage that has moved our relationship from one of acquaintance to friendship.

“I do not call you servant any longer but I call you friend” – Jesus addresses himself to each one of us. How we hear and understand that statement will be greatly influenced by our experience of human friendships. How did those first disciples understand the word and the concept, ‘friend’? They had both the scriptural influences of the Hebrew Bible and the understandings that were current in the Greek and Roman culture around them. They knew of the friendships of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi.

In the Gospel of John the word ‘friend’ occurs six times and the word that is used in Greek is ‘philo’ and this is linked to one of the words used for ‘love’ in the gospels, ‘phileo.’ The Father loves Jesus the Son and shares his plans and purposes with him – that is what friends do. To be a friend is to share a personal relationship and to be aware of and participate in the plans and purposes of the other.

Friendship was a favourite topic among Greek philosophers. Pythagoras, the very one whose mathematical theorem has come down to us, saw friendship as the epitome of all virtues. Competition and rivalry have no place in friendship – trust is essential.

Socrates viewed friendship as the most precious of possessions, the greatest blessing that a person can have. For Socrates, a friend shows generosity and courage in supplying the needs of his or her friend.

When Jesus says to his disciples, ‘you are no longer servants but friends’ that sounds like a promotion, a change of status or a change in the nature of the relationship and truly that is what it was for them and can be for us.

What we need to be aware of is that being ‘a servant or a slave’ of God was not a title of shame but that indeed being a ‘friend’ was lifting the relationship to a whole new level of intimacy. So we see from Jesus’ words that friends of his now share in the knowledge of what God is doing. God, in and through Jesus is creating a community of love that is to embrace all people.

But while we are feeling a nice, warm glow as we talk of friendship and see ourselves as partners of Jesus – we should be aware that this comes at a price.

The world that does not know God, hated Jesus and the friends of Jesus. If we are to be fully friends of Jesus we have to have a share in what it means to follow him. This friendship can be costly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who took a stand against Hitler and the Nazi regime which cost him his life knew this only too well. He wrote a book which encapsulates this, “The Cost of Discipleship.”

If a servant changes and becomes the friend of the master, then the master’s burdens become the servant’s burden. There is a new mutuality and sharing.

Think about it. Jesus says. ‘you are now my friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.’

The whole world, particularly the suffering world of war, famine and fear – is the area of God’s action and our friendship means that we are called to partner him in witness and care for that world. If this is what being a friend means – are we ready for this? For to be a friend of Jesus is to be brought into the inner circle, to be made aware of what God is doing and to participate with God in what God is doing. A friend has to take responsibility within a friendship – there has to be that identification with the other, that loyalty to the other, that closeness to the other.

Many of you are members of organisations – based on your school, your profession, your city or town of origin. You know only too well what level of commitment is required if such organisations are to flourish and serve their purpose.

Friendship is not something one can turn on and off at the flick of a switch. Friendship is not a question of how many people follow you on Twitter or like your Facebook posts. Friendship is for the long haul, friendship is tough. Indeed, some may say, ‘if this is friendship, then the life of a servant or of just an acquaintance looks more attractive by the minute.’ Whether you turn to Greek philosophers or to the Christian Gospels you will see that friendship is marked by altruism. It is a commitment sealed not because we can get something out of it but because of what it is in its own right.

Sadly, many relationships even intimate ones turn out to be anything but altruistic and fall short of those wonderful words in 1 Corinthians 13. "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." Marriage and parenthood can become debased into ways of meeting individual economic or biological needs.

We are only too aware these days of relationships that pass as friendships but which are not wholesome and positive. Abuse and exploitation of vulnerable people, grooming of youngsters into relationships are passed off as friendships but this is to debase the term completely.

Perhaps the greatest claim we can ever make is that our wife or husband, our parent or child has become our true friend – not the partner or child who owes us anything but the fellow human being whom we love.

So Jesus wishes to call us friends and for us to draw on the rich understanding of friendship that we see in the Bible and, hopefully, experience in our lives. Jesus' life and ministry was an enacted parable of what friendship is – bringing in the outsider, including the marginalised, and offering encouragement to the sick and downhearted. But Jesus also challenged people in pursuit of friendship. Remember the rich young ruler who wanted to get into heaven? Jesus challenged his ideas of who his real neighbour was. Remember the woman at the well, whom Jesus challenged? He knew the chequered history of her life and did not just gloss over it.

Friends are people who tell it as it is, who tell us things that we probably do not want to hear about ourselves but who do it in a loving and constructive way.

St. Augustine called friendship – 'a school of Christian love' – the place where we can grow and learn and deepen our understanding of what true friendship is.

In this passage from John's Gospel which we have focussed on this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that they become his friends to the extent that they keep his commandment of love in their lives. There, it would seem, that friendship is still conditional but in the next verse that condition seems to be removed for Jesus says, 'I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends.' The initiative is with Jesus 'we love because he first loved us' or, as we say in the baptismal service 'before we knew anything of it.'

'No-one had greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.' As we come to this Communion Table this morning, we recall that Jesus washed his friends' feet. Shared bread and wine with them and faced the cross for them.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering fare too small
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Do we wish to be a mere acquaintance of Jesus or in a servant relationship or are we willing to be his friend?