

Sunday 9th May; Easter 6

Friends of God

Acts 10:44-end

John 15:9-17

One of the first LPs I bought when I was still at school (some 50 years ago now!) was the LP “Tapestry” by Carole King. It was of course on vinyl, and although we have a record player I have to confess it’s in the attic – along with the collection of LP records including this one. Not much use if you want to listen to one of the LPs. So I recently bought “Tapestry” again on CD so that I could play it on our CD player. There’s a track on the album called “You’ve got a friend” which goes like this:

*You just call out my name
And you know, wherever I am
I'll come runnin'
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
You've got a friend*

Friends are really important. Like mine, I am sure some of your friendships go back years. School friends, college friends, work friends, neighbours. Maybe they are friendships that, even if you haven’t seen each other for a long time, you can pick things up exactly where you left off. Perhaps some of your friendships are more recent. I know some people in the congregation have made new friendships over this past year with those they have been speaking to on the phone each week. Old or new, friendships give us an opportunity to share with each other, learn from each other, support each other and get to know each other better

Unfortunately the concept of friendship – which to me means an open, honest, living relationship – has been devalued somewhat with social media. Making someone a “friend” on facebook does not imply any depth of relationship. My facebook account shows that I have 98 friends. – and looking through the list there are some very surprising people – people that I would never think of as my true “friends”. 98 sounds like a lot, but in facebook terms it is a tiny number. My daughter has nearly 500. Some of who I guess she hardly knows.

A true friend is surely someone who is always there for us, will always be ready to listen, to help, to encourage, to support and to comfort as well as someone with whom we can share joys, successes and achievements. I hope you are fortunate to have such a true friend – or maybe several.

In our gospel reading today Jesus talks about his disciples – and by extension us – being his friends. There's an echo here with the wonderful story of Abraham in the Old Testament. Abraham who God called his friend. Abraham who spoke with God face to face.

Here's what Jesus says in our gospel reading: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends*

It's an amazing thought that we can be friends with Jesus – and hence, like Abraham, friends with God. So how can this be? How can we develop and deepen this friendship. How can our friendship with Jesus become one that will sustain us refresh us and encourage us through good times and bad?

Last week, you will recall that Gill was speaking to us about the close connection we can have with Jesus. Jesus used the picture of the vine to illustrate this. He is the vine, we are the branches. It's impossible to say where a branch ends and a vine begins, because the branch is not only attached to the vine, it is part of the vine. This is the "abiding in love" that is being spoken about in the gospel reading, being part of the vine. If you abide in love, says Jesus, you will keep my commandments, and if you keep my commandments you will be my friend. So the friendship we can have with Jesus springs out of this close, connected relationship.

How then can we develop such a relationship?

I guess it's like any friendship. Trust, time, commitment, love, shared thoughts. In Christian terms when we are talking about these things in relation to God himself, we might call all of these things prayer.

Because prayer is not just asking God for things. It's about resting in his presence. It's about enjoying spending time with him – praising, thanking, reading and studying and simply being. It's about our faith being not just for Sundays at church but being for the whole of our lives; for all that we do and all that we are. Faith is about our Monday mornings and Thursday afternoons – our time with our families and at our work and our leisure - being as much part of our worship and prayer life as our Sundays. But the key times are times we spend intentionally with God in prayer.

The thought of spending time in prayer might seem like a bit of a hard task. But spending time with someone we love is never a burden – it's a joy. Think about the time you spend with those who are closest to you – your best friends if you like. Spending time with them is an essential part of keeping that relationship alive and fresh. It's something we want to do. And it's the same with our relationship with God.

So how can we do this?

Of course Sundays are vital; in terms of our relationship with God and also with other Christians – the church. Being part of a group of Christians on the same journey, the same path as we are. Sharing our experiences and our worship; our faith and our doubts. Growing together.

But there are other possibilities. Daily or other regular times set aside for scripture reading, prayer and response. Study groups – a great opportunity at the moment is the Pilgrim course that we are starting on Thursday evening looking together at the Lord's Prayer. It's not too late to join up.

And then there's Bible reading on our own. Various notes and reading aids are available to make this simpler and more meaningful. Margaret would love to help get you started. Talk to me if you would like some help.

Each of us has to work out what's best for us. We are all different. Being outside in the country; inside in a chapel or a church building. Maybe as you walk to the shops, spend time in your garden or even do the washing up. There will be particular things that bring you closer to God

Prayer can be hard, but it is worth working at as it helps us develop that friendship.

The Church of England has long used the 10 days between Ascension Day and Pentecost as an opportunity to set aside time to pray. In recent years our Archbishops have encouraged this under the "Thy Kingdom Come" banner – picking up on the familiar words from the Lord's Prayer. This year we are distributing across the parish nearly 200 copies of a special prayer journal which Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York, has put together – hopefully you will be getting one before Ascension Day – 13th May. For each day between Ascension and Pentecost there will be a short Bible reading, some thoughts from the Archbishop, a short prayer you might like to use and some space for your own thoughts and prayers. Maybe after using this you will find your prayer life, your connection with God, just that little bit easier.

This development of our relationship with God, our friendship with God, is not to just to benefit ourselves. In an echo again of the vine image Jesus talks of this closeness, this connection enabling us to bear fruit – fruit that will last.

Elsewhere in the New Testament – in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia – we have a beautiful description of what the fruit of the spirit is. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* This is the love that Jesus spoke about in action – in our lives, in our families, in our neighbourhoods, churches and communities. This is the love in action that will change the world.

But we don't produce this fruit by our own effort. It's not just a case of trying harder. It comes from being part of the vine; it all flows from our connection with God. The closer our relationship, the more intimate our friendship, the more fruitful we become. And just like an apple tree can only produce apples, and apples can only come from an apple tree so the

fruit – the way we live – will reflect our being connected with God. The fruit will be lives more like the life that Jesus lived.

The best human friendships we have are those friendships which enable us to become better people, enable us to reach our full potential. The same applies to our friendship with God. By being connected with the source of all life we can be strengthened and changed into becoming the best we can be. We can be filled with God's spirit as we begin to bear fruit by who we are and what we do. We can have his life and love within us. We can live as he wants us to live.