

## Jesus said: 'I call you friends'

I was sent this story, a while ago, by a member of our congregation. A group of men, all aged 40, discussed where they should meet for lunch. Finally it was agreed that they would meet at Wetherspoons in Uxbridge because the waitresses were very pretty and wore mini-skirts. Ten years later, at age 50, the friends once again discussed where they should meet for lunch. Finally it was agreed that they would meet at Wetherspoons in Uxbridge because the food and service were good and the beer selection was excellent. Ten years later, at age 60, the friends again discussed where they should meet for lunch. Finally it was agreed that they would meet at Wetherspoons in Uxbridge because there was plenty of parking, they could dine in peace and quiet, and it was good value for money. Ten years later, at age 70, the friends discussed where they should meet for lunch. Finally it was agreed that they would meet at Wetherspoons in Uxbridge because the restaurant was wheelchair accessible and had a toilet for the disabled. Ten years later, at age 80, the friends discussed where they should meet for lunch. Finally it was agreed that they would meet at Wetherspoons in Uxbridge because they had never been there before.

The concept of friendship is difficult to define. What does it mean? Using Google on the computer doesn't help. I tried and it came up with 320m entries. And no I didn't look through them all. Anais Nin writes that: "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." Oprah Winfrey once said that lots of people want to ride with you in the limousine, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down' In the same vein Marlene Dietrich was heard to say: 'It's the friends you can call up at 4am that matter.' Epicurus, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, wrote that it not so much our friends' help that helps us as the confident knowledge that they will help us and Ben Jonson wrote: "He's a really wonderful guy. Why if I asked him to, he'd give the shirt off his back. After all it is mine." I smiled at the comment, of Pepper Rodgers, the former UCLA football coach, who, after a disastrous season, commented: "I had only one friend, my dog. Even my wife was mad at me. I told her a man ought to have at least two friends. She agreed and bought me another dog."

Genuine friendship offers each person a place of rest and comfort, a place where it is safe to risk self-disclosure. Real friends remain even after they have seen shattered hopes and dreams. Genuine friendship is not pre-programmable, it is not predictable! Most times it just happens. Anything can happen and often does! A natural affinity emerges and develops and to have a friend and, to have more than one, is something for which we should be eternally grateful. "Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls down, the other can help him up. But if someone is alone and falls, it's just too bad, because there is no one to help him. If it is cold two can sleep together and stay warm but how can you keep warm by yourself? A rope made of three cords is hard to break." (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12)

Jesus' first meeting with his future disciples is revealing. John's Gospel (1:35-39) paints a picture of John the Baptist standing with two of his disciples when he recognises Jesus. The disciples, hearing John refer to him as the Lamb of God, tag along to see what happens. Jesus asks: What are you looking for? They wanted to know where he was staying. "Come and see!" invites Jesus and we are told: "They went with him and spent the rest of the day with him." Here, Andrew and John were called. Peter, Philip, Nathaniel followed quickly. How extraordinary it must have been to be invited to where Jesus was living, eating with him, seeing where he slept, being part of his life for that day and, as it turned out, from then on. It was like staying with a friend. Jesus WAS calling them to be his friends. He calls us likewise. We heard this morning: "I call you friends" (John 15:15) Paul writes: "we rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ who has made us God's friends."

Security is a buzzword these days. We long for stability, predictability, reliability as we try to plan to survive in one piece. We lock our house, insure our possessions, health, our life against the unthinkable. When we are scanned as we board a plane, our bags searched as we enter the theatre, as we are searched and questioned by security, when we wear name tags, use swipe cards, when our every movement is recorded on CCTV, when we secretly code in pin numbers to use our credit card, when we show a utility bill, passport, birth, marriage and any other certificate to open a bank account, or be appointed for a job, when we are police checked, insurance checked, credit rating checked, we hope that we are secure. But are we? In a moment our lives can do a 180' degree turn. Life can change in a single moment. We know this from our own experiences. We can see it, too, in the lives of others.

Paradoxically, becoming a friend of Jesus, means that we can remove our obsession with security. When back in Oxford, I sometimes go into Keble College Chapel and just stare at Holman Hunt's painting of the 'Light of the World'. It is of Jesus knocking at the door, a door with no handle. The artist says the door represents the human soul, the rusty nails and hinges overgrown with ivy show that door has never been opened. Jesus knocks, he asks for permission to enter, he doesn't open the door. "Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Keble College Chapel, to me seems an imposing, dark place yet, where it is, the halo and lantern in the painting are brilliant.

The disciples were invited to open the door and they did. Jesus became a friend, sharing not only his lodgings but his life! Whatever happened later, they did show love in this life-changing, life-lasting friendship. Jesus meant for his fishermen disciples to become 'catchers of men', but this may mistakenly conjure up an image of control, of people being swept up, brainwashed possibly, caught up in a net controlled by an outside and dominating force. Staring at that painting, in the College chapel, though, I know for certain that Jesus is as far from this as you can possibly get. Friendship with Jesus releases us into a freedom that we could never hope to earn, embracing God's grace and friendship. It was in this context that Jesus says; love one

another as I love you. You did not choose me, I chose you and you are my friends (John 15). From their initial calling Jesus offered his disciples, as he offers us today, an intimacy with God which people before him could only dream about. They didn't dream about it. They believed it to be impossible. It is an invitation. God's choice!

Henri Nouwen, in *'Making all Things New'* writes: "we say to ourselves, What if I get flu? What if I lose my job? What if my child is not home on time? What if there is not enough food tomorrow? What if I am attacked? What if war starts? What if the world comes to an end? What if....? .....Since we are always preparing for eventualities, we seldom fully trust the moment. Our individual as well as communal lives are so deeply moulded by our worries about tomorrow that today can hardly be experienced." He goes on to write: "Jesus does not speak about a change of activities ....contacts or even a change of pace. He speaks of a change of heart...When we worry we have our hearts in the wrong place. Jesus asks us to move our hearts to the centre of a friendship with him. We then live in the security of knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God and completion of his purpose in our lives."

Jesus would ride the bus with us as well as the limousine. We can call him up at 4am or any other time in the confidence that he will help us and be there for us. And as Anais Nin says about friendship, in our meeting with Jesus a new world is born."

I recently read a story about the great Swiss-German theologian, Karl Barth. He was delivering one of the last lectures of his life at the University of Chicago. When he finished, the person in charge said that, because of Barth's failing health he will only answer one question from the student audience. A student asked: "Of all the theological insights you have ever had which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?" Here was a man who had written thousands and thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put down on paper. Everyone, in the audience, was waiting to find out what this great insight would be of the greatest theologian of their time. Karl Barth closed his eyes, thought for a moment, then smiled and said "The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" After that, what more can any of us say about a friendship with Jesus.

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