

SERMON – 20 August 2017: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“FRIENDSHIP WITH JESUS”

John 15:9-17

“I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (v15)

All my life, for as long as I can remember, I have thought of Jesus as my friend. Maybe it was the pictures I grew up with of Jesus with little children, walking hand in hand with them or sitting them on his knee. Maybe it was singing “What a friend we have in Jesus” or “Jesus, Friend of little children, be a friend to me.”

I continued to see Jesus as friend through my adult life including the time spent studying theology.

There was a painting in Muirhouse Church with Jesus walking along and smiling and chatting to a boy in BB uniform, maybe that is a well-known painting although I hadn’t seen it before. It was a bit Victorian and stylised and it certainly depicted Jesus as friend.

It was only in adult life that I discovered that not all Christians see Jesus as their friend. They cannot accept that God incarnate, God in the flesh, the creator of the universe, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, could be the friend of a lowly sinful human being. And yet is that not the heart of the gospel, the wonder of salvation.

Jesus laid aside his majesty and became a little lower than the angels, he came from heaven to earth and perhaps his main reason for doing this was to become our friend.

I looked at some definitions of “friend.”

A friend is a person you enjoy being with. That should apply to Jesus and you as you take time to be with one another.

Friends are attached to one another by feelings of affection or personal regard. That would fit the Jesus and me relationship.

A friend is someone who is on your side. Jesus often tells us he is on our side, fighting our battles, carrying our burdens, watching over us and protecting us through his holy spirit. And we should proclaim that we are on his side and act accordingly, we are on the Lord’s side.

But I think that the definition that is the stumbling block to some Christians is where it says that friendship is mutual and reciprocal, suggesting an equality between friends. And some would argue that we could never consider ourselves to be equal with God, to be equal with Jesus and so friendship is impossible.

Now I don't think friendships are always based on equality between the participants. There are different levels of friendship. Friendships might change and deepen over time.

It can be hard to adjust when the status of a relationship changes. For example, you might have known a teacher as Mr. Smith and you meet him in a different setting later in life and he says "Call me Dave" and you think that is not possible! It might become possible through time but the power balance in the relationship was very much with Mr. Smith and it takes time to adjust.

My course director when I trained as a psychologist was Dr Margaret Clark. I was her student. After graduation I was one of her research staff at Birmingham University and so I was her colleague, albeit a very junior colleague – she had stepped up to professor - and it was extremely hard when she said "Call me Margaret!" I still see her from time to time, she 91 years old, still lecturing and publishing new books on childhood education, it's easy to call her Margaret now as we are clearly friends.

And so it is possible to have friendship between two people of unequal status and for that friendship to change and develop over time.

Jesus himself said that "you are my friends."

The idea of being a friend of God was not a new concept, it is found in the Old Testament.

James 2:23 – is talking about Abraham's faith and actions and James said "**Scripture was fulfilled that says Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he was called God's friend.**"

Where did James get this notion from? There are two references in the Old Testament to Abraham being God's friend.

2 Chronicles 20:7 – Jehoshaphat's prayer when the people were threatened by invading armies (we focused on this a couple of weeks ago) – "**O god, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?**"

Isaiah 41:8 – Isaiah speaks the words of God, God says "**But you, O Israel, my servant Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend.**"

And so it was not entirely new that a human could be a friend of God but in the Old Testament Abraham was probably the only man called a friend by God. And he was a giant in biblical terms, the founder of the faith of Israel.

In contrast, everyone in a new covenant with Jesus becomes his friend.

Jesus said ***“Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*** John 15:13/14)

Now some people puzzle over these words. Who are Jesus’ friends here? Did Jesus not teach that we are to love our enemies so why did he say that greater love has no-one than that he lay down his life for his friends, surely an even greater love would lay down his life for his enemies?

The answer is summed up by Paul in his letter to the Romans –

Chapter 5 – ***When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man though for a good man some might possibly die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** (verses 6–8)

Paul goes on (in The Message) - ***Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we’re at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!*** (verses 9–11)

How amazing is that! Christ died for his friends, that is, for all sinners for all eternity! So we should not be worrying about the contrast between friends and enemies here because Christ’s offer of friendship encompasses all.

We should, however, look at the contrast implied by the words “greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life.... Greater than what? What else could Jesus offer? He could offer a cup of water but to lay down his life is greater. He could offer wealth but to lay down his life is greater. He could offer perfect health but to lay down his life is greater.

To turn that around, we could pray for water and food and wealth and health but to pray for a deeper love relationship with our friend Jesus is better by far.

We can pray for our children that they grow up to achieve their potential, get good grades at school, get a place to study, to work, a partner and children of their

own.....but the best thing we can pray for them and over them is that they come to know Jesus as Lord and friend.

Divine love dies for his friends. Divine love dies for the sinner. Divine love dies for you and me. Divine love dies for our children and future generations.

Jesus goes on to say ***“You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”*** (verses 14/15)

I no longer call you servants or slaves but friends. This would have meant even more to those who heard Jesus speak these words in his day. Doulos, the slave or servant of God, was a title of great honour in the Old and New Testament. Moses was the doulos of God (Deuteronomy 34:5) as was Joshua (Joshua 24:29) and David (Psalm 89:20). Paul counted it an honour to be called a doulos of Jesus Christ as did James.

And Jesus says “I have something greater for you yet: you are no longer servants or doulos, you are friends” and so Christ offers an even greater intimacy with God which not even the greatest men and women knew before he came into the world.

Jesus’ listeners would also have known that the Roman emperors and kings in the middle east had a very select group of people around them called the friends of the king or the friends of the emperor. At all times these people had access to the king, even being able to come into his private quarters. The king talked to them before he talked to his generals and rulers and politicians. And so the friends of the king were those who had the closest and most intimate connection with him.

But the king was still the king. And our friendship with Jesus is asymmetrical in many ways.

We are loved by Jesus with the greatest, most unconditional love. We can never love Jesus with the same power and intensity of love that he has for us, we can never love each other with the same power of the divine love that comes to us from Jesus. Jesus is a friend who loves us even when we are unlovable.

One of my grandchildren aged five was really acting up last week and I finally told him that he would not go on a promised outing that afternoon. He was angry with me and said “You don’t love your grandkids then!” I quietly told him that I will always love my grandkids but I might not always like their behaviour! I think Jesus might think the same about us at times!

Jesus laid down his life for us, most of us are not called to literally lay down our lives for Jesus although in some respects we are called to die to our old selves and be born again Christ.

Within this friendship with Jesus, he commands and we obey. It is inconceivable that it could be the other way round.

Friendship between humans is not really the best model for our friendship with Jesus which is different and unique. We can be such fickle friends. You know the saying that some people are “fair weather” friends. We can distance ourselves from difficult friends and hard situations. If someone seems immature or too demanding or embarrassing then we can bail out.

We can apply a cost/gain analysis of our friendships – if the cost is too high and we feel we are not getting enough back, again we can bail out.

I read an article written last year by a pastor in the US called Dave Zuleger entitled The Best Friends are Born for Adversity. He said that church should be a place that builds itself up in love no matter the cost, a place where the children of God purchased by the blood of Christ gladly care for each other’s physical, spiritual and emotional needs.

Our churches should be places where friends move towards pain, suffering and hardship in love, not away from it in selfish fear. Christ never gave up in us, despite all our sin. Therefore we cannot give up if we think people are being difficult or hold bitter grudges. Love does not keep a record of wrongs. Friends in our churches must commit to walk through the deep pain and sorrows of life together, to be there when things are hard. And stay when things get harder.

Our friend Jesus does all that for us. When we gather at his table shortly, let us renew and refresh our friendship with him and let us renew and refresh our love and friendship for one another here in this church.

AMEN