

Year C – Friendship With God themed sermons

Exodus 33: 7-11. James 2:19-26. John 13: 9-15

God Wants You as a Friend

This is the first of four sermons on the theme of Friendship with God. The ministry team (Joy, Chris, Peter and I) discussed what the theme for this year's October sermon series should be, and we agreed it should be about our relationship with God. Chris got to work and has selected readings for each week, all with a slightly different focus. She did an excellent job with this. Today's focus is on 'God wants you as a friend'.

I want to dive in straight away to look at John's gospel. It is a gospel we get portions of at different times of the year, but unlike the other three gospels it does not get a lectionary year to itself.

Today's reading is from John chapter 15 verses 9 to 15. Starting at John 13:32 the writer of this gospel invites us into a long passage of teaching in which Jesus discloses the life of the new age, the age of the kingdom of God. When we read this whole teaching, let alone its culmination in the Last Supper segment we have just heard, I am not sure we can instantly grasp their whole meaning and importance for our lives. We can hear the words, we can understand what is being said, but I doubt that one first reading, or maybe on tenth or more readings, we really let it soak in and impact on our lives.

Maybe I am just slow at this God stuff, but I suspect not. When talking to others on retreats, or with Spiritual Directors, there seems to be, for many people, a slow and steady maturation, a slow soaking in of the words of Jesus, a bit like letting something marinade over night to soak up flavours.

Jesus' words, "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands, and remain in his love," and "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you."

Jesus is offering us a 'deal', or maybe a 'contract', no, the right term is a 'covenant' with God! We can all intellectually understand its terms, I hope, but this offer is not solely one that requires intellectual assent. It requires our whole bodily assent, as we say in the summary of the Law, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength'.

How else can I put it? Jesus' offer is the equivalent of a marriage proposal. When you proposed, or were proposed to, I hope it wasn't a cold intellectual contract being offered, but instead an 'all of you, heart, soul, mind and strength' enthusiastic Yes!

When we respond with our heart, soul, mind and strength to Jesus' invitation, what we get in return is the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, to guide and lead us.

We certainly need the Holy Spirit. Because in desiring this covenant with God, we are tasked with something that feels impossible; to love one another, to stop trying to manipulate one another, to lay down our ego, and offer our true self to each other, to show our strengths and also our vulnerabilities. I could phrase this as saying, 'we are required to give God to one another, and receive God from each other'.

Jesus knew that people would fail at meeting their side of the covenant, but asked them to strive for it anyway. And, as far as I am concerned Jesus is saying those words to me and to us, every single day. Those words are as fresh today as they were in the Upper Room, sharing a last meal with his imperfect disciples. Although it matters that we fail, it also matters that we continue to strive to meet the terms of that covenant and have another go, as every day dawns.

Jesus, the human manifestation of God, makes this invitation to us all. It is one of the clearest examples we can have of God inviting us into a meaningful and rewarding relationship with God. God invites us into friendship, into a relationship, into God's community. As with marriage proposals, friendships are not solely an intellectual assessment, but based on mutual respect and care.

So, how are we to find a way to accept God's invitation of friendship, of agreeing a covenant with God? Our reading from Exodus, gives us some insight.

Moses created a 'tent of meeting', a special place set aside from the busyness of the camp. Moses would enter the tent of meeting, and we are told that the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. It is interesting that the text does not say that Moses spoke to God as to a friend, but I think that is implied. It may also help us understand that Moses may have entered with a question for God, or to offload something on his mind, but the majority of the speaking was by God. I suggest Moses was a very good listener. There is no time frame in this account – did Moses stay there for four minutes, or forty minutes, or four hours perhaps? Maybe each time was different. That would certainly accord with many people's experiences of seeking a word from God. Sometimes there is silence, sometimes a long silence before there is a word or a thought or a nudge that comes from God, sometimes it can be fairly quick, sometimes the sense of the message is not at all clear, and time in silent reflection and prayer can only help give clarity.

And what do we do with our friendship, our covenant with God? Do we keep it to ourselves, feeling redeemed and saved, able to worship with confidence, praising God and knowing you have a place in God's kingdom after death? As you might expect from me, I have always had a strong conviction that treasuring our faith and treating it like the gold ring Gollum wanted to keep hold of, is anathema to God. God's covenant with us is for us to help bring glimpses of God's kingdom to others who have yet to know God and walk in the way of Christ. The reading we had from James (which Martin Luther abhorred, of course), illustrated that Abraham's faith and his actions worked together; his faith was made complete by what Abraham did. James quotes scripture, "Abraham believed in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness", and he was called God's friend.

Our triune God is community, and wants us to be God's friend and join with others in community and fellowship, to model God's kingdom. Friendship only deepens with time spent with the other person. Moses did this by spending time in the tent of meeting, listening more than speaking to God. For each of us, we need our own version of that tent of meeting; a quiet calm space indoors every day, a daily walk unencumbered with phones or music, or whatever works for you. Luckily for us, even if you haven't communed with

God for a while, like a old friend, you can pick up and continue the relationship as if it was only yesterday that you last spoke and listened.

Do whatever works for you. The litmus test is, does it give you joy and energy when you hear Jesus say to you today, "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.... You are my friend if you do what I command."?

God is waiting. God wants a relationship with you. What are you waiting for?

In 2008 at Taizé, I was hesitant about kneeling down and touching the prostrate cross with my head, even though something inside of me wanted to. Br Alouis said to me, "What are you frightened of? God loves you." That was all the prompting I needed. I knelt, a mystical knowing communion with God flowed. I felt known by God in that moment, as like never before.

Now, I don't need to go to Taizé to be in communion with God, although it is a place of great spiritual power. I wonder where you find or may find such a place for the friendship to be nourished and grow.

May the Lord be with you.