

John 15:9-17;

06.05.18

Friends

Right at the heart of the Christian faith lies the astounding claim that that you and I have been made to have a relationship with our Creator, the living God. Yes, central to our faith lies the conviction that from all eternity God has chosen to create, and to reach out to us his creatures, drawing us into his own divine life. And this relationship between God and us is rich and deep and is pictured in the Bible in many ways.

So, for example, the Bible speaks of God as our Lord. And I don't know what associations that word 'Lord' brings to your mind, but this surely is a relationship in which we are brought to our knees in recognition of one who is far above and beyond us. Before our Lord we are servants who are humbled, and there is distance and an appropriate fear and reverence between us and him.

There is, however, more to God's dealings with us, his creatures, than this. As well as picturing God as our Lord, the Bible also speaks of a much more intimate relationship, one in which we are pictured as children who God loves with a parental tenderness and intimacy, and so we call God Father. And there is more to this relationship than meets the eye. To be precise there is only one true child of God, only one who may truly call God Father, and his name is Jesus Christ. But by a miracle of grace God invites us to share in that unique relationship between God and the one whom he calls his Son. So in his life among us, in moments of deep joy and also in moments of deep anguish and sorrow Jesus called out to God, 'Father!' And God's great gift to us is that through Jesus we might echo in our lives that cry of love and trust that was wrung from Jesus' heart and so call God 'Father' too. And again, I don't know what associations that word 'Father' carries for you. It may have bad associations if your relationship with your father has not been good. But surely at its best the word Father brings to mind one who loves his children with a passion and whose overriding concern is their wellbeing – indeed one who will give everything for them.

So we move from Lord to Father, and that is a big step. In fact it is a giant leap that brings God closer to us, and it is not one that is to be taken

for granted. It should not be assumed that we might call God Father. I am not interested here in trading off one religion with another but it has to be pointed out that Islam has 99 names for God – and ‘Father’ is emphatically not one of them.

But then there is one further step to be taken. In our reading from John’s Gospel this morning Jesus says this: ‘you are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer... but I call you friends.’ And here God takes one step even closer to us: from Lord, to Father - to friend. The philosopher Aristotle wrote a great deal about friendship and he maintained that it could only happen between equals. A slave could not be friend with a Master: the gulf between them is too great. Well, here is the beauty of our faith – that in Jesus Christ God becomes our equal, one with us, a human creature in solidarity with us. In fact in coming amongst us in Christ God becomes our servant – and invites us to be his friend.

So, Lord, Father, Friend – and what does it mean to be a friend of God? Last week we were looking at earlier verses in this chapter from John where Jesus speaks of himself as a vine to which we are attached as branches. And Jesus describes the relationship between vine and branches as one of ‘abiding’ – the vine abides in the branches and they in it. And so we are called to abide in Christ and some people asked me afterwards last week what it means to abide.

Well, by changing the image from vine and branches to friends Jesus, I think, clarifies this relationship. Because first of all friends stay close to one another. Contact is essential to friendship and to be friends with God through Jesus means that we keep close, and we have disciplines like prayer and meditation that help us to do that. We seek out the presence of God as friends seek out one another. But then friendship also involves loyalty. We are true to our friends and with Jesus that means living the way he calls us to live. It involves obedience. In friendship we show loyalty in practical ways, and so Jesus says here: ‘you are my friends if you do what I command you’ – and he has shown us how to live.

So, vines and branches abide in one another; friends keep close and show loyalty to one another. And so with us and Jesus.

One last thing. Friends also eat together. The word ‘companion’ means one who eats with us and a meal is sign of friendship. And in his

ministry Jesus got into trouble over the people he shared meals with and became known as 'a friend of sinners'. And so today, here at this table, Jesus invites us to gather as his companions and to break bread with him. So come, friends of Jesus, friends of God. Amen.

O holy, living God,
all praise honour and glory be to you,
our Maker, creator of all.

We praise you, God, far above and beyond us,
the Lord before whom we bow in humble adoration.
And we praise God who has come near us in Jesus your Son,
adopting us as your children,
reaching out to us in parental love.
And we praise you, God,
who has come amongst us in Jesus as our friend,
our companion, with all the blessings of friendship.
We praise you God: our Lord, our Father, our Friend.

Yet we recall the words of Jesus,
'you are my friends if you do what I command you',
and we confess to you all the ways
in which we fail to obey your commands
and to live as Jesus told us to live.
Forgive us for every way in which we are unworthy
to be called your friends.

O living God,
We praise you that in Jesus you have come
to lay down your life for us your friends,
and so to save us from our wrongdoing.
Reassure us, God, of your grace and mercy.
Meet us here in our worship,
and in your Word,
and in bread and wine,
and give us strength to live as your companions.
For we pray in Jesus' name....