

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

God of all,
we give you thanks for the gift of friendship:
for the giving and the receiving;
for the opportunities and the challenges;
for the laughter and the tears;
for the conversations and the silence;
for the moments and the memories.
Draw us deeper into your love,
and bless us with the confidence
to proclaim Jesus as our dearest friend, teacher and Saviour.
We ask this in his name.

Amen.

Reading: John Chapter 15 verses 9-17

Sermon by Rev Peter Lyth

You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You got troubles, I've got 'em too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together and see it through
'Cause you've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me

These are part of the lyrics for Randy Newman's song, "You've got a friend in me" that features in the Pixar film "Toy story". The film's plot focuses on the relationship between an old-fashioned pull-string cowboy doll named Woody and an astronaut action figure, Buzz Lightyear, as they evolve from rivals competing for the affections of their owner, Andy Davis, to friends who work together to be reunited with Andy after being separated from him. The spirit of friendship spreads wider in the three sequels but the verse in the song really sums up the relationship between them.

So what is friendship? Those who are conversant with Facebook will know that one can add “Friends” with whom one shares messages and photos. But one can add endlessly to that list ending up with thousands of “Friends” – but are they really friends in the true sense of the word?

In the film “Bohemian Rhapsody”, Freddy Mercury, the frontman of the band “Queen” goes off the rails as his fame grows. He becomes surrounded by people who feed off his fame and fortune, but he eventually realises that he had friendship all along with the band together with new friendship with his companion for the last few years of his life, Jim Hutton.

All too often, friendship has been degraded to acquaintanceship but really it should be a deep relationship including empathy, support and comradeship.

The reading from John’s Gospel focusses on just what friendship means in the context of relationship with Jesus Christ. It has to be said that it does not make for easy reading. The Greek word that is used by John is *philos* which means “loved one” which means far more than a casual acquaintanceship. Jesus tells his disciples that, rather than being his servants, they are redefined as his friends. This is a big shift that places both honour and obligation on their shoulders. Often, people confuse this status with Jesus being their “best mate”, but it is much more than that. So what is it that Jesus is saying?

There are three things that distinguish the friendship that Jesus is talking about. The first is that a friend of Jesus is both loved and chosen. The extreme definition of love that Jesus gives in verse 13 is, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. This must be inspired by what followed – the death of Jesus himself. In this huge act of sacrifice, he takes the role of servant and victim and the disciples (and us too) are indebted because of that. There is also an interesting cultural shift that we overlook today. In Jesus’ time, disciples would seek out a Rabbi or teacher that they would follow, rather like students choosing a university and completing their UCAS form. However, here the role is reversed. Instead of the disciples choosing the teacher, the Rabbi chooses his disciples. Lest people think that this somehow creates an elite, in fact those who are chosen as friends are to bear lasting fruit. Equally though it is reassuring to know that Jesus is always there.

The second thing about this friendship is that a friend of Jesus knows what is going on. Unlike a watcher of “Line of Duty” who is baffled by the plot until almost the final frame, the friends are let in on the story unlike servants who are left in the dark as far as the big picture is concerned. So the disciples are told of the crisis that is approaching and that Jesus will soon depart. The disciples are promised the Spirit of truth that “will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you”. So the friends of Jesus become part of the story as they discover the empty tomb and find in it the light that will guide their lives thereafter.

The third thing about being a friend of Jesus is that it means to keep his commandments and to love as he has loved. This might seem a bit odd. How can you be commanded to love? Surely it is something that comes from within? However these commandments are very different to the commandments found within the Old Testament. Here instead, they refer to the directives that Jesus gives to his disciples, or to those which Jesus receives from the Father that guide his career on earth. These in turn inform the directives that Jesus gives to the disciples. So this gives a chain of command that is articulated in verse 9, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love”.

The Father’s love for Jesus mirrors that for his disciples. Jesus therefore is asking the community to love as he has demonstrated.

So here friendship is defined by Jesus’ love. The community is commissioned by Jesus (“I appointed you to go”) to do works of love. That community – the community of friends of Jesus is one that mirrors Christ’s love. In the image of the vineyard, the works of love are “fruits that will last” – fruit that abides as we abide in Him.

Jesus calls us to be his friends so that we can take his work further – as he has loved us, so we take that love into the church, but also beyond to all that we encounter. In that way we bear fruit that will last. Jesus has called us to be his friends – that is a great privilege. Let us respond with love.

Prayers of intercession

God of love, friend to those in power,
with the local elections this week we are reminded of the privilege we have in being able to engage in democracy and vote. Whatever our political leanings, we pray for those who have retained or gained places on our local councils. May they be diligent in working for the communities they serve, passionate about improving the lives of others, and open to listening to views different from their own. Equip *all* of our political representatives with the gifts of thoughtfulness, grace and integrity.

God of love, friend to those in pain,
we look at the situation unfolding in India and continue to feel despair for those who are ill and dying and for those grieving for loved ones. We pray for the urgent supplies India needs to arrive quickly. We pray for more oxygen, medicine and vaccines. May countries who have plenty be generous in their response to the crisis. Please bring the people of India some signs of improvement and some signs of hope.

God of love, friend to those who are tired,
even though we are moving out of crisis mode we know that many of our medics and nursing staff are exhausted after a year of covid. Help those in the NHS who are weary and tired find rest and renewed enthusiasm for their work. There are also many members of our wider communities left with long covid symptoms, struggling with daily life. We ask for insightful research into the after effects of coronavirus and ways to help those who are finding it hard to return to normal life.

God of love, friend to those who are struggling,
as the country opens up and some of us move back to real life meetings or going out to work we are aware that there are many for whom the pandemic has brought profound change to their circumstances. We think of the people have lost their jobs and faced financial hardship as a result. We ask for resilience in the face of such difficult times, perseverance as people seek new work and try to cope with the demands of everyday life and courage to face the challenges each new day brings.

God of love, friend of our friends,
thank you for the gift of friendship. Thank you for the people who bring fun and joy into our lives. Thank you for the warmth friends bring. Thank you that we can once again see those we love and enjoy their company. Despite the pain and struggle this year has wrought we thank you for the friends that have helped us, stuck by us, cheered us up, listened and sympathised and helped us cope. Bless our friends and help us to look to Jesus to learn how to deepen our friendships and live the life of love he modelled.

Amen

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