**22nd May 2016**

**Philippians 2.19-30**

Over the last couple of weeks we have been looking at the gift of God’s Spirit, given at Pentecost but still active in our lives and in the world today. Over the next few weeks we will look at how the Spirit changed those first disciples and their relationships in the early church. We will be looking at a few of Pauls’ letters to those first churches and the people he mentions in those churches and the lives they lead and the qualities of their character and friendships he picks out worthy of mention and emulation. It is a study in Christian friendship.

The last May Bank holiday I had a couple of days with some old friends walking the Wye valley. We canoed the first part in Canadian canoes whilst singing the song ‘Land of the silver birch, home of the beaver where does the mighty moose wander at will…’ I could go on but it was embarrassing enough at the time and didn’t half scare the other canoeists on the river.

These other four male friends I have known since university days, when I was still a teenager. We were part of the Christian Union at University so we had a common bond in our relationship to Christ that meant we were able to relate at a deeper level than other people we knew at University. Men in particular are very competitive with each other and don’t want to show any signs of weakness – so when men get together it tends to be all bravura and banter without showing the chinks in your armour. Trust in any friendship is always a key ingredient and I guess if you reveal any sign of weakness to someone you can’t trust, there is always a fear that they could use that against you at some stage. Best be cautious is the usual default position.

Men and women were created to live in a relationship with God and each other (Genesis 3:8; 2:18). Sin caused the breakdown of all these relationships (Gen 3:8-19), so that we all live with the tension of desiring human friendship (because of how we were created), but often find them difficult or painful (because of the inherent sin in the world around us).

Today is Trinity Sunday when the church remembers that at the heart of the Godhead is a community of love Father Son and Holy Spirit. At the heart of reality is a relationship of love and community. Recent commentators have criticised monotheistic religions – that only believe in One God, because they believe they can legitimise terror and oppression: there is only one truth, one God – so submit or be damned. Belief in God as Trinity opens that up to say the ultimate truth in the universe is love. So potentially it leads to a less threatening and more inclusive view of God.

These old friends from university days journeyed together in the challenge of being a Christian at university and working together to make Christ known at university – so there was a common purpose and shared task that united us. We also went through those formative years of discovering our vocation or starting a career, finding a partner, going to each other’s weddings and starting a family. Those experiences bond you together.

What was surprising though was at the end of the weekend as we were leaving I said my goodbye and thanked them for our ongoing friendship. Many of them said with frank honesty that despite all living in different parts of the country this group was still the closest friends that most of them had. Despite their work and their families and their involvement in churches it was still friendships made thirty years ago that were still precious to them.

That may speak of the precious time of youth when being responsibility free you can forge those special friendships. It may also speak about the pressures of time and work in today’s society. But I do know that what made those relationships special was our regular times of prayer and bible study and work together for Christ. We had a common cause.

In today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians we discover two friends of Paul who were united with him in the work of Christ: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

It is a claim of the gospel that Jesus restores relationship. On the cross by destroying the “dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) between God and one another; he brought that forgiveness and acceptance through his death on the cross. We no longer have to question whether God likes us or whether God is angry towards us: though some still do. The gospel says that God is for us: not against us. God loves us so much that his Son Jesus Christ was prepared to die for us. That draws us into the love of God and restores relationship with God through the blood of Christ, blood that was spilt to save our sins and give real tangible proof we matter to God.

Secondly Jesus restores friendships by example. He chooses disciples as friends (John 15:14). Within that group he had a small group of three friends with whom he was especially close, one of whom was his closest friend.

Jesus demonstrated that marriage is not the only solution to ‘aloneness’. Close friendship is another solution. Our society, with its overemphasis on sexual relationships, often undervalues this God given provision.

Four things that stand out in Paul’s description of his friendship with Timothy and Epaphroditus:

1. Genuine Love. (v.20) Paul contrasts Timothy’s “genuine interest” (v.20) approach to friendship with a surrounding culture blighted by self-interest (v.21). *I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare.****21****For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*

I was brought up in Sunday school with the mnemonic JOY: Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last. In that order is the way to true joy. I have to say most of those in my Sunday school class from what I gather, have completely ignored that and reversed the order. Yourself first, others second and Jesus ignored. More YO than JOY.

Timothy goes against the grain in that he is more interested in others and in following Christ than he is in his own self-interest. People like that are gold dust. How many of your so called friends will ask you how you are and pay an interest in your life. More often than not people just talk about themselves or their family. Timothy had a genuine interest in others.

Likewise, Paul’s genuine concern for Epaphroditus (v.27-30) is equal to Epaphroditus’ genuine concern for the Philippians’ interests rather than his own (v.26). Epaphroditus had been sent from the Philippians to Paul with money. Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The church he had founded in Philippi had heard he was in need so had collected money and sent it to him through Epaphroditus. Having become seriously ill, almost to the point of dying, he is troubled, not about being ill and close to death, but that they might have been upset by it. *For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill*. V 26.

He was like those who when ill are not so much worried by the illness as the fact that they might be a burden to their family or friends.

Here we see the first mark of genuine Christian friendship: it arises out of a genuine love for other people.

Those who are only interested in themselves seldom make many friends. Those who want friends in order to satisfy a selfish requirement will never make them. Friendship comes through a genuine interest in other people.

Dale Carnegie, who wrote ‘*How to win friends and influence people’* said ‘you can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you’.

Genuine love for others should not be confined to those who are already Christians. Friendship is by far the most effective way to pass on the good news of Jesus Christ. But we do not make friends in order to evangelise, but Friendship and evangelism go hand in hand. We make friends because we are genuinely interested in them and hopefully they in us. If it is true friendship and they are interested in us they will find out about what makes us tick: what our values and beliefs are.

2. Second reason for their close friendship was their common concern for the interest of Jesus Christ (v.21) *for everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.* Ordinary friendships are made by people with interest in common doing things together. C S Lewis wrote:

*We picture lovers face to face but friends side by side: their eyes look ahead… that is why those... people who simply ‘want friends’ can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends... friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice’.*

Often work friendships don’t last because when you leave work you no longer have the same common interest.

Close Christian friends have a common focus quite unlike that of the surrounding culture (v.21). This unique dimension in Christian friendship gives an unparalleled closeness that the New Testament terms “fellowship” – about which the world knows nothing. Fellowship comes from more than our common interest in Christianity. It comes from the trust, security and openness that is the result of our common focus on Jesus Christ.

We have a common interest in the work of Jesus Christ. That’s why Epaphroditus was sent with money to Paul from the church in Philippi. They wanted to support the work of Christ through Paul.

Supporting your church shows an interest in the work of Jesus Christ. Money is of course vital for the work of the church. At the recent church meeting we discussed many challenges before us to keep this church growing and doing the work we believe the Lord wants us to do. It will take money but our offerings have been stagnating recently so we spoke at church meeting to remind people to reconsider their giving and to come before God in prayer to consider how much they could support the work of Christ through this place. The gospel calls us not just to think about our own interests but the interests of Jesus Christ and his Church.

It is true that Jesus accepted everyone, but it is also true he chose his friends. How do we decide who to build deep friendships with? Inevitably people get on with some better than others. We are all different personalities - that is the rich variety of life especially in any group of individuals. They say you only have the energy and time to maintain a handful of close friendships anyway. But one of the ways you are likely to develop those friendships is by serving together.

3. Third reason for close friendship is the opportunity to Serve Together (v.22) Paul and Timothy’s friendship had a common vision and goal. Both understood their roles in pursuing that purpose together. Paul didn’t lord his apostleship over Timothy, but they “co-slaved” together (in Greek v.22 means “he slaved with me”). Often it’s working together for the gospel that brings us close to our Christian friends. Likewise, Epaphroditus was Paul’s “fellow-worker” (v.25).

A lot of the so called mundane jobs in church life from serving the coffee, catering, fabric jobs and working on the property are also great opportunities to make friends while doing so. You share in a common purpose.

Friendship and mission go hand in hand in the New Testament. When people take part in outreach be it through our foodbank, our child contact centre, working with children or young people, helping out at a holiday club; you share in something special and that brings a depth of friendship.

Any group in church not involved together in “the work of the gospel” in whatever aspect, eventually shrivels and dies. Conversely, working together causes friendship to flourish. It is always a good question to ask: What are we trying to achieve together?

4. Finally real Christian friendship involves taking Risks and Battling Together (v.25) The three words in v.25 “brother, co-worker and fellow-soldier” are arranged in an ascending scale of common sympathy, common work, common danger and toil and suffering.

Epaphroditus had been prepared to “risk his life” for Paul (v.30). His name suggests his parents had devoted him to Aphrodite – the goddess of love and the patron of gambling. The Greek historian Plutarch, calls the highest cast of the dice “Epaphroditus”, so his name may mean “one blessed with gambling luck”. Likewise, the RSV version of the bible describes the expression in v.30 as “hazarding his life” and an accurate translation may be “gambling his life”. Perhaps by associating with Paul (who was in prison) he risked being charged of the same offence, or risked his health through excessive hard work. Either way, he showed reckless courage and disregard for self.

In the days of the early church there was an association of men and women who were called ‘the gamblers’ their aim was to visit prisons and those sick with dangerous and infectious diseases. They were willing to hazard their lives for Jesus and for others.

In Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, Portia, the rich and beautiful heiress has many suitors. Her father designs a test for them. He puts out three caskets – one of gold, one of silver and one of lead. One of them contains a portrait of Portia. The suitor who chooses that casket will win her and in marriage. On the god casket are the words ‘who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire’. On the silver, ‘who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves’ and on the lead, ‘who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath’.

The Prince of Morocco, who is full of selfish ambition and self-interest, chooses the gold and finds inside the immortal words:

All the glistens is not gold;

Often have you heard that told:

Many a man his life hath sold,

But my outside to behold.

The prince of Aragon, who is full of self-importance, says ‘I will assume desert’, and opens the silver. He finds a portrait of a blinking idiot and says:

With one fool’s head I came to woo,

But I go away with two.

Bassanio, whom Portia loves and who genuinely loves Portia, opens the lead casket and finds Portia’s picture and the words;

Turn you where your lady is,

And calm her with a loving kiss.

He is the only one of the three who is prepared to ‘give and hazard al he hath’.

All friendship involves taking risks. Jesus was open (John 15:15) and committed to the hilt (John 15:13) yet one of his friends ended up betraying him and another one denied him. Christian friends know that it is often in hazarding our lives for one another that we find true blessing.

All friendships involve taking risks. The risk of rejection, hurt of being letting down. But it is in giving that we also receive. It is in hazarding our lives for others that we find life and friendship.

Christian friendship seen in the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus, show genuine love, common interest in the work of Christ; a desire to serve others; a willingness to risk and battle together.

May God bless us as we try and find real friendships and be real friends.

*Taken from Nicky Gumbel’s Life Worth Living : Monarch Books*

*CS Lewis quote from ‘The Four Loves’*