

Easter 6
21/05/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:44 - 48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1 - 6
John 15:9 - 17

I call you friends

Prior to the Second World War the strongest bond Australia had with another nation was its link to Britain. In those days the use of the term “the old country” betrayed the fact that this was an **unequal** relationship, as if between a parent and a child. In the process of calling our resources back from Europe to defend ourselves in the Pacific war a new alliance germinated, which this week reached new heights. Our Prime Minister visited Washington where President Bush declared him a **friend**. The link, formed between our nations over 60 years ago, and forged even more strongly when the two leaders were together during the attacks of 9/11, now reached an apparent zenith. But is this an equal relationship, free of domination and exploitation? Or is it a repeat of the paternalistic relationship we had with Britain? Are we bound to love only what our powerful friend loves? Or is there sufficient mutual trust and respect to allow Australia to be a companion of integrity with equal power, even to the point of disagreeing or doing its own will?

For individuals, friendship is one of the things that make the world go round. But, as competitiveness has escalated and increased mobility has alienated people from their roots, friendship has suffered. The capacity for strong human connections formed by stability, and the empathy which deepens over time, has been degraded. Acquaintances we do have; associates with whom we network for particular purposes are many, but real friends are few.

The ancient world had a threefold understanding of friendship. There was: 1, the natural association, as between brothers, parents and children, husbands and wives; 2, the relationship between co-operative groups bound for a particular purpose, as in merchants, soldiers or even thieves; and 3, there was the union of souls in pursuit of common, noble ideals. St Anselm, who in the 12th C became Archbishop of Canterbury, gave great dignity to the friendship of souls united with God in worship. His reason for this priority was because, while all natural relationships would pass away, this one retained an unaltered existence in Heaven. However, when it came down to the point, friendship was especially for those who were committed to the monastic life. Friendship for Anselm was a very beautiful thing, but its highest expression was an elitist male preserve, rather like an old fashioned senior common room at a British University.

In the 17thC the Quakers took the name “Friends of the Truth/Light”. They believed Christ was immediately present to each person as light, and held that ordained ministers and consecrated buildings were irrelevant to true Christian fellowship. Those who shared the light of Christ became a Society of Friends. There was something set apart about this even though, compared with the church of the day, it was relatively democratic and free of hierarchy.

I call you friends: When Jesus speaks to his disciples in this way, he does so in a context framed by commandments to love. *Love your neighbour as yourself* was well known to his audience, but here Jesus here reiterates the new commandment: *Love one another as I have loved you*. “As I have loved you” is the **new** element and it reflects the self-giving of his own life that came from his oneness with God the Father. He was no slave or servant who did only what he was expected to do. He lived in complete at-one-ment with God. In him the love of the Father was expressed in a relationship of deep, mutual intimacy. The reality he embodied revealed that the heart of God searches for us, and seeks to restore us to the fullness of life for which we were created. When Jesus calls us friends, we are included in the deep mutuality of the Father’s love for him.

When Jesus called his disciples friends he differentiated between them and slaves who simply respond to their Master’s commands without knowing the reason why. The friends of Jesus have been told everything. The full counsels of God have been imparted to them through him. Being party to this knowledge does not mean joining an elite, or never having to serve again. A friend lives in a relationship of love as a partner, and out of that partnership serves, in response to the gift of being loved. Discipleship is not grounded in duty so much as in love from God, and responding affection **for God, and for those whom God loves**.

You did not choose me, I chose you. When we think of friendship it involves **mutual attraction** between those who have much in common. The friendship Jesus speaks about is based on his initiative toward those who were indifferent or even hostile. If Jesus chooses his friends, does this imply there are some - enemies perhaps - whom he rejects? *You did not choose me, I chose you* can really only be read against the background of the initiative of God, expressed in John 3:16 - God so loved **the world** that he gave his only Son... God chose to love **the world**. In this initiative God did not choose some, and not others. God chose **all**, even those who were his enemies. And God continued to love them, even when they put to death the one who embodied his will amongst them. Whereas by its actions humanity should stand condemned in the eyes of God, the Resurrection is the revelation that God’s continuing choice was to stand in the midst of his enemies, in order to make us friends. The gracious action of God overturns the ancient concept of friendship, and by this seeks to redeem us from our acute and alienating self-love.

When Jesus says: *You are my friends if you do what I have commanded you*, this means the friends of Jesus, the church, are called to love what he loves. That is, they are called to love God, and the world, which God loved. For the church *God is Love* is not a general truth to be written up in gold letters on the wall. It is an event - something that has happened to us and is to be repeated amongst us in acts, which seek the good of others. This makes a massive difference to the sort of priorities we would choose. It means choosing to love the outcast, the downcast **and** our enemies. Measured against the love of God the sort of friendship manifested in forming an alliance to wage a questionable war on another must itself be questionable in the strongest terms. The friendship manifested is not born of love, but of other more carnal desires. The pattern of divine self-giving seen in Jesus Christ shows God is found amongst the powerful and the successful as a challenge - which is why we may have something to say to our Prime Minister and his friend. And because in his self-giving Jesus is found where there is alienation, suffering and disintegration, this has something to say to us as church, and as

community, as we watch the ongoing exposure of the humiliation and degradation that exists amongst Indigenous communities in Australia. This is our shame, for it speaks of a great lack of sensitivity and justice, and friendship even humanly understood. But for us who live in the light of Christ, it is even more urgent. The humanity that was raised to dignity in Christ is being crucified afresh daily. The road will be long and painful, and it will certainly require a deep and divine quality of self-giving if we are to make a difference here.

As we contemplate the immensity of persisting evil in the world it is good to remember that Easter is the feast which conquers all. It stands for the fact that God was not satisfied to leave things in a state of alienation and degradation but, from the lowest point there is, gave us the light of a new kind of grace-filled friendship to show us the way. A friendship like no other. One that we did not choose or deserve but is given to us freely before we ask. If we have this friendship, there is nothing more we could possibly have. And the quality of this friendship is such, that we cannot keep it to ourselves.