



Community as friendship

w/c 24 November 2024

"I don't need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better." (Plutarch)

Read Romans 16:1–16 and John 15:13–17

Our passages this week highlight two aspects of friendship for us to consider – friendship with God and friendship within the church. Focussing on the former, most of us will have encountered John 15:14 often enough for its earth-shattering message to have become diluted to the point of familiarity – friendship has become what we expect of God. To his first audience though, Jesus' words would have been fairly mind blowing. Putting it simply, gods did not do friendship. Awe, wonder and worship, yes; friendship, no. What do you think about the idea of being a friend of God?

In our passage from John's gospel, verse 13 seems mostly concerned with Jesus own impending death. It has though, over time, become an affirmation of the sacrifice of others. How far do you feel that this is just a restatement by Jesus of the idea in John 10:11 – *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* or is he truly giving us a norm for Christian behaviour? It's worth looking back at verse 12 as well and also reflecting on 1 John 3:16.

The list in Romans 16 provides us with several points of interest – the balance of men and women (especially among those Paul singles out for their special contributions (7:5 to women)); several named we know to have been rich while others (by their names) are probably slaves; some are Jews, among the others there are both Greek and Latin names. How does all this speak to our understanding of the early church? How might our church today exhibit a similar mix and balance?

Jesus spent much time with people who the society of his time would have labelled as 'sinners' – see, for example, Luke 15:2. On the other hand, Paul warned the Corinthians (quoting the Greek writer Menander) that *"Bad company corrupts good character"* (1 Corinthians 15:33). How do we balance the need to follow in Jesus' footsteps while not risking our own 'corruption'?

If we turn our thoughts to ideas around friendship within our community here, do we have to like everyone in our church, or do we just need to love them? What might be the danger of just looking for our friends within the church bubble? Turning outwards, how does one forge real, deep relationships with non-churchgoers without either treating our faith as something not worth mentioning or leaning towards the soapbox preacher?

As a community, how do we witness to those we know who once were in a church and have now left? Some will have left with their belief intact but had issues with the church as an organisation, others have left their faith behind. How could we engage with them without confirming everything that made them leave in the first place? In general terms. What might it be about the church as it exists today that puts off the those who have left? What sort of community might attract them?

As we focus on friendship, how do we welcome into our church community those who have yet to find faith?

"It's the friends you can call up at 4am that matter." (Marlene Dietrich)