

The strength of friendship. 2/11/14

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. (Jn 15:13-14).

Readings: Ecclesiastes 4.7-12, John 15.1-17

Friendship changes over the course of our lives.

As children we may have many friends who we played with.

As we became older there may have been one or two special friends.

If we have settled in one place for a long time we may have very deep friendships.

If we have moved around a lot we may have made many friends, but not had time to get to know them well.

You will have your own experience of friends and friendship.

What do you look for in a friend?

What do you consider to be a sign of good friendship?

Who was your best friend at school and are you still in touch?

Is friendship important? – to answer this we might ask:

older generations – have you ever had a pen pal? Have you ever taken the time to write to someone you didn't know in a far off country and begin to build a relationship. Perhaps you sent each other photos and news about your school, your hobbies and your families.

younger generations – facebook. Of course intergenerational, but young people have really taken this up. One of the features of this online community is accepting people as a friend. One of the worst things that can happen is that you are un-friended, taken off a list of friends.

Do you belong to a club? Maybe golf, cards, dancing, flower arranging, swimming ... meeting with others who share similar interests and sharing friendship in pursuit of that interest.

Abraham Maslow – psychologist wrote in the 1940's about basic human needs. Famous for his hierarchy of human needs.

In his view the first thing we need is food and drink, the basics of life.

Secondly we need safety. We need a safe environment in which we can live with a sense of security.

Thirdly we need love and belonging.

There are other things which follow this, but very high on the list is the basic human need for friendship, intimacy and family relationships. Studies have shown that without friendship people are more susceptible to depression and anxiety.

When you think about this you probably wonder about those who don't seek friendship.

Perhaps there are times when you prefer to be alone.

Depending on your personality you might have many friends and be a party animal or have a few close friends and prefer some solitude. Such diversity is normal. Added to this there might be times and seasons in life when we have more friends than at other times.

Some people do become reclusive, these people withdraw from society and cease to interact with others.

But we don't see this as normal human behaviour. Sometimes it is a sign of a lack of social skills or ability to relate with others. In some cases it may be linked to a mental illness, obsession or paranoia that drives people away from normal social interaction.

Normally human beings seek friendship and relationship with others.

We naturally understand the need of friendship whether we are the pen-pal or facebook generation.

The bible has a lot to say about friendship

Ecclesiastes 4.8 stark, blunt description, *There was a man all alone*

Immediately as we read it we realise that this is not a good situation. We have a basic sense that such a person may be vulnerable and in danger.

he had neither son nor brother.

There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?"

This too is meaningless— a miserable business! (Ecclesiastes 4:8).

This stands in stark contrast to the words of God in Gen 2.18 *It is not good for the man to be alone.*

One of the first things we learn in the bible about humanity, it is not good to be alone.

We were created as relationship beings, to be part of a community, a group, a family.

We have a build in, God given need for others.

Clue to this earlier in Gen 1.26 when God says, *Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,*

Notice the plurals used in this sentence, Let us, our image, our likeness – who is God talking to and referring to as *us* and *our*? We understand this to be God communicating within the nature of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God's nature is relational and communal in the divine being.

Creating humanity in the image of God makes us relational beings who have a need for others.

We are created for community - In our life time we have all manner of friendships and relationships:

Closeness of **family** – parents and siblings who in the right circumstances are our friends for life.

We have the intimacy of **marriage** were our husband/wife is our best friend

Friends who we meet at school, in clubs, or community events, socials and dances.

Workmates and colleagues who we share friendship with though our working life.

Church – people who become our spiritual friends and family as we worship and serve God.

Clarify – not everyone will be married, some people may never have known their birth family, many of us will live on our own at some point in our lives – but this doesn't mean that we are alone. In those situations we very often meet our need for friendship in other ways, and met up with people in different situations so that our need for friendship is met.

God created us as relational beings, created for community and meant to socialise with others.

The bible is full of stories about friends and friendship that we don't have time to consider, but which you might like to reflect on.

In Ecclesiastes the man alone faced many problems and his life was miserable. Look at vs 8:

No end to his toil – With no one to help or share the load, his jobs just kept mounting up. No sooner finished one job, than another task needed to be done. He was on a never ending treadmill – no respite. **Being alone meant his life was more burdensome.**

He lacked contentment *his eyes were not content with his wealth*. – he was driven by greed, he could never be satisfied, he would never reach the point of having enough.

He had wealth but no friends. Maybe his quest for wealth meant he had no time for friends and work cost him his friends and his family. Maybe as a workaholic he never had time for others, for his wife or his family.

He lacked purpose and meaning – he asks rhetorically *for whom am I toiling?* What is the point of my labour?

There was no one to share the rewards with, no one to inherit his wealth, no one to benefit from all his hard work. He was accumulating wealth, but to what end? He had no family to

benefit from the fine food or clothing he could afford. He had no friend to give a gift to.

Being alone made his life miserable – he was deprived of enjoyment. There was no fun in his life, no creative diversions, no rest and no recreation.

His lifestyle and greed were not conducive to making friends.

Being alone led to a burdensome and miserable life that robbed him of contentment and lacked purpose or meaning.

This is a sad description of a human life gone wrong. No wonder:

God said *it is not good to be alone*

The teacher in Ecclesiastes said *it is a miserable business.*

The Message Bible expresses it like this:

I turned my head and saw yet another wisp of smoke on its way to nothingness: a solitary person, completely alone—no children, no family, no friends—yet working obsessively late into the night, compulsively greedy for more and more, never bothering to ask, “Why am I working like a dog, never having any fun? And who cares?” More smoke. A bad business.

vs 9-12 describe the value and strength of friendship

Friends achieve more together (vs9)

There is a better return and reward for their work. Two people can lift bigger weights and do a greater range of tasks. The old saying, *many hands make light work.*

Friends are there to help in a time of need (vs 10)

A parishioner once told me of a time she was unwell and a friend called to offer some help. She brought around some lemonade. But opening the bottle proved too much for the sick person and with the effort she fainted.

But in that situation her friend was there to attend to her and to help her up.

We all fall, not just physically, but find ourselves down, perhaps discouraged and in need of a helping hand.

Friends give comfort to each other. (vs11)

In this verse it speaks of the practical sense of the warmth of a human body that can help another keep warm. But this is also a picture of the warmth of friendship, of human kindness that comforts us in the dark night of the soul.

In times of disaster, we might think of the Christchurch earthquakes or the disaster at Pike river mine, where we often see pictures loved ones, sometimes strangers, holding each other and comforting each other.

At times like that a lot of baking is going on in that community as people take food to their friends and neighbours.

Men may take time to sit with each other, maybe in bloke-like silence, but being a presence of strength and support to each other.

When people are hurting, the simple fact that friends are gathering around them makes a real difference.

Friends bring greater safety and strength (v12)

The writer uses two illustrations here:

danger of attack when alone – one person is more vulnerable and unable to defend him/herself. Those looking for a victim will look on someone who is alone as an easy target. But when two or three people are together, in the first instance they do not present themselves as such an easy target or push over; and also with numbers they have a greater ability to defend themselves and protect each other.

The strands of a rope – this is a very practical and visual illustration. We can picture this in our minds. We might have had times when a light rope broke, perhaps when towing a car and we needed a bigger rope with more strands in order to move the car.

This verse lends itself to use at weddings.

The two strands represent the husband and the wife being joined in marriage and the third strand is taken to represent God.

We say that they will have greater strength together if they allow God to be a part of their married relationship.

I don't know for certain if the writer had God in mind as that third strand, but I suspect he did.

The bible stresses to us that God is a friend.

Not only were we created to share friendship, relationship with other human beings, we were **created for friendship with God.**

We need to take care that this image of friendship with God is not so relaxed and casual, that it would be disrespectful.

We don't think of or treat God Almighty as a buddy or pal.

I am not using the idea of friendship with God as being impertinent or insolent or disrespecting God.

Rather friendship with God is something that raises us up, gives us dignity and value.

Glance at the scriptures with me – you can look at this in detail when you have more time;

Garden of Eden – God walks in the garden in a friendly and familiar way so that Adam and Eve could have time with him.

Try to imagine yourself in that situation where being with God was common place. A time when God was not distant, but talked to you face to face and was available to you.

The Garden of Eden reveals we were created for friendship with God.

Both Abraham and Moses were called friends of God. They spent time in God's presence. Moses talked with him face to face in the tent of meeting.

The Pharisees tried to insult Jesus by calling him ... *a friend of tax collectors and sinners.* As a sinner myself, I take comfort and draw hope from that. Jesus freely spent time with people like me. Jesus reached out to people like me and was seen with

all sorts of sinners. He spent time with the sick, even the dreaded lepers. He made time for children and outcasts.

Amazingly Jesus said to his disciples: *Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.* Jn 15.13-14

Jesus died for his friends, so that we could enjoy his friendship eternally.

God created us to enjoy his friendship

Wonderful truth –too good to be true, more than we could hope for, far more than we might dare to dream.

God is friendly

God invites us to be his friends.

Hold this thought for a moment, God is friendly.

If we were to ask people to describe what God is like, I wonder how many would say God is friendly.

Some might say distant, angry, unfair or uninterested.

As Christians we discover – God is friendly.

God is willing to risk having his reputation sullied and to wear the accusation, *friend of sinners*, as a badge of honour.

Through the death of Christ on the cross, God has made a way for us to be forgiven and to have the privilege of being his friends.

He invites us to spend eternity at his place. Jesus said he has gone to prepare a place for us, to get heaven ready for our arrival.

The picture at the end of Revelation where the heavenly city comes down to rest on the new earth, and God makes his dwelling there is a picture of the garden of Eden restored.

God our heavenly friend is again in our midst.

What difference does this make to you?

The teacher of Ecclesiastes realised just how meaningful friendship is.

I have mentioned before that in a hospice situation, as people draw close to death and the important things of life are

distilled, they often come to two important questions, *Am I loved?* and *Did I love?*

Friendship is at the heart of what it means to be human. The context of a deep and close relationship with other human beings, a place in which love is shared, where love is given and received, brings meaning to our lives.

Friendship adds a quality of life to our living. It brings fun and enjoyment to us allowing us to share memories and pleasures with others.

It doesn't matter if you are a Christian or a non-Christian – we all need friends.

So it is worthwhile fostering our friendships. Perhaps your life has been going at a hectic pace and you haven't made time for your friends. Maybe in the week ahead you could put aside an hour to spend with a friend, invite them for a cuppa or take them for a coffee. Perhaps you might make the effort to go along to the club this week, spend some time with friends bowling, fishing or just chatting.

Perhaps even more important than earthly friends is to renew your friendship with God.

Being here today is doing that, giving praise, stilling your heart and listening for his voice. Coming to church and being with your church family allows you to foster and grow your spiritual friendship with God and his people. I commend you for it and encourage you to keep it up.

We as a church give priority to friendship.

We seek to be a spiritually healthy church where we *Share in fellowship.*

Twice a month there is a social evening with games held here at Epsom, a place to enjoy the company of others and have some fun.

G-SET often organise social activities for our church including, bowling, theatre, quiz nights and go-karting.

Our home groups are not just places for bible study, they are places where friendships develop. They often do social activities together.

Men's Tea, Chit-Chat and other groups in the church give us opportunities to develop friendships.

I want to take a moment to speak to those who are members of the church.

Friendship – and deeper fellowship are very important in our amalgamation.

Our amalgamation will not work well if we don't put some extra effort into getting to know each other.

The recent General Assembly has instructed Presbyteries not to allow Parishes to amalgamate any more. Amalgamations will now become very rare in the PCANZ.

Small churches will simply be dissolved or assimilated into larger congregations.

This is because experience has shown that amalgamations generally don't work.

We have amalgamated. We want this to work. We want our church to grow.

One important aspect of making it work is to develop godly friendships and that takes effort.

We need to be intentional about building friendships across the different church sites and between the different church services.

If you haven't yet been to one of our social events, then choose to come along to the next one.

Look in the bulletin and find one that might suit you.

Come along, bring a friend, and be a friend to those who gather.

I also want to stress the importance of friendships and relationships in the process of a person coming to faith.

People are more open to God when a relative or friend invites them to church and when the people at church are friendly towards them.

A very high percentage of people initially come to faith through the influence of a relative or friend.

When a friend or relative they respect is a Christian, people may be more inclined to see Christianity in a better light and be more willing to explore it for themselves.

It is important for us to both be good friends and to invite those friends to church.

So let us be a church where we:

Strengthen our friendship with God and develop our friendships with God's people.

Let us take advantage of the various social activities we have as a church, both to enjoy the friendship ourselves, and also to invite and include others to enjoy it.

Let us not simply be a friendly church, because every church considers itself friendly – even the unfriendly ones, but let us be intentional about sharing friendship with those who are new and those on the fringe of our church life.

And let us do this so they and we together may enjoy a close friendship with God, both now and into eternity.

All this to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.