

'I no longer call you servants but friends' – Sunday 9th May 2021

Friendship hasn't had a good press recently. There are disturbing suggestions of government contracts being given to friends of officials without due process, of friends influencing the Prime Minister unduly and then being removed from their post when they fall out with other friends and there are suggestions that rich acquaintances have been asked to donate money for the use of the Prime Minister. Whatever the truth, the accusations are a reminder that friendship can become what the tabloids call 'cronism' with its suggestion of corruption. Which is tragic because, actually, friendship is the glue which holds our communities together.

George Elliott offers an insight:

'Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.'

That quote brings together the kindness, trust and forgiveness which are found in a true friendship. With friends we feel accepted, understood and safe. Margaret Coles, writing about Julian of Norwich in *The Times* this weekend described Julian as someone who had a deep and trusting relationship with God. Julian lived through illness, war, famine and bubonic plague, and yet she could assert that we are God's beloved, his 'precious darlings.' We are safe in God's love, but our horizons are limited, Julian says by our 'poverty in love.' Why else would we condemn and punish ourselves, she asks, when God has loved us out of the need for guilt.¹

But how do we develop such a depth of 'friendship' with God? We aren't Julian of Norwich with her gift of visions, nor the disciples in the upper room, nor Moses whom God spoke to 'face to face as to a friend.' I think the readings we heard today promise that in friendship, God makes the first move. I wish that we could have sung rather than spoken Psalm 98 as it celebrates the joyful working of the Spirit of God. More and more created things take up the praise of God. The sea, the rivers, the hills are all created by God and all have the capacity to respond to God. As Christ himself said on Palm Sunday, 'I tell you, if the people were silent, the very stones would cry out.'² So in the psalm we hear:

'Sound praises to the Lord all the earth...
let the sea thunder and all that is in it
Let the rivers clap their hands and the hills ring out together before the Lord..'

And the fourth verse confirms that the Spirit of God doesn't just fill inanimate objects, or the chosen few, but everyone:

'He has remembered his mercy and faithfulness
towards the house of Israel
And all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.'

God's love and faithfulness will stretch to all nations as far as the end of the earth. The reading from Acts shows the Spirit doing just that. Peter is visiting Cornelius, a good man, a God-fearing Roman Centurion, but not a Jew. And as Peter speaks to Cornelius and his

¹ Margaret Coles Credo *The Times* May 8, 2021 p 90

² Luke 19.40

family, telling them of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching and death and resurrection, the gentile family hears, really hears, so that they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and praise God. Peter's companions are astounded, but it is indisputable. The Spirit of God has filled unbaptised pagans with the same joy and praise which is present in psalm 98. Peter calls for water and they are baptised – but the Spirit of God came first, before the baptism. God made the first move.

And in the Gospel reading Christ promises his disciples the joy of friendship. 'I have said these things that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.' It is the deep and abiding joy of being no longer servants but friends, companion and fellow workers with Christ. Even if that friendship leads them, and us, to follow Christ in laying down our lives, still, along with the loss of life we are promised joy. What is joy, but the outworking of the Spirit of God or, as we have learned to call it, 'the Holy Spirit?'

The relationship of friendship is always reciprocal. God is generous and God's Spirit infuses even stones and hills and rivers with the capacity to respond to God with praise. And they do respond! - in the flowering of Spring, in the morning chorus of the birds, in the glory of the sunrise. God's offer of friendship to us is deeper, more costly and so, too, must be our response.

'I no longer call you servants, but friends,' Christ says, friends who recognise and internalise God's command to love. Friends, who in trust and love do the work of Christ because it is what we most long to do. Friends who moment by moment, over the years of a life time, are willing to lay down your lives for our friends because, filled by the Holy Spirit it has become our **joy** to do so.