

FRIENDS OF JESUS
Preached by the Rev John Chalmers
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St John spends the major part of his Gospel on the discourse of Jesus which was shared on the night before his death. This discourse is often referred to as Jesus' "Last Will and Testament". The man, who at the end had nothing of any material worth (save a purple robe for which the soldiers played pitch and toss), left an extraordinary legacy of values, standards and beliefs.

And it's all here in the happenings of that last night of Jesus' life which we have been reading about today. The night in which St Luke notes that "Pilate and Herod become friends" – how worrying is that, when such forces get together and describe it as friendship? The night that an unknown friend provides a room for meal; the night that a friend conspires to betray and the night that another friend swears to be loyal whatever the cost and, before the cock crows, he is torn apart by his weakness and his denial - this morning I want to talk about "friendship".

So much happens on this, the last night of Jesus' life. There is so much drama, so much narrative crammed with so many images and so much meaning and symbolism. On this night, Jesus girds himself with a towel and demonstrates how his love is to be shared in the service of others. From this upper room comes the *Mandatum Novum*, the new commandment, "that ye love one another as I have loved you". On this night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took some unleavened bread, which was set aside for the Passover and instituted a new celebration, which has sustained his people through all the long years of history, and on this same night he enjoins his people to be ONE, just as he and the Father were ONE.

There is so much of raw narrative and emotion in this last meal that it is impossible to trawl its depths. This morning, however, I simply want to highlight the way in which Jesus, in word and action, illustrated the deep meaning of friendship. While other kinds of friendship (Pilate and Herod) stand to one side in stark contrast, it is from this Upper Room, it is here on the last night of his life, that Jesus declares his disciples are no longer servants – BUT NOW THEY ARE FRIENDS.

And Jesus talks about the greatest love being that of giving up his life for his friends. He says, in Chapter 15 vs 15, "I do not call you servants anymore. Servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends". The most moving and remarkable thing about this statement – and the thing that makes it worth examining again – is the fact that one of the greatest deficits in our society today, is that so many people are friendless. No matter how much traffic there is today on twitter feeds and no matter how many "friends" "like us" on social media networks, when it comes to the bit most of us have very few people that we can truly call friends and if the measure of friendship is the one that Jesus sets out in his table talk, then the list gets very much shorter.

Some years ago I read a wee book called "The Lonely Heart" and in it the author recalled the story of a landlady who came back to her lodging house earlier than usual one night and on opening the door she sniffed the unmistakable smell of gas. It came from beneath the locked door of one of the rooms. With the help of a neighbour they managed to break down the door, and inside they found the unconscious lodger who had tried to take his own life. He was a retired, impoverished actor who had once been a household name. He had left a note which, if his suicide had been successful, would have been his last will and testament. It had one sentence and it read – "I'm taking the only way I know out of this hell of loneliness."

His may sound like an extreme case, but the frustration and misery of loneliness is a very real condition for many people in our society today.

- I have worked half of my ministry with ministers who are surrounded by people and yet the role brings with it an isolation that can be quite devastating.
- It is possible to be lonely in a crowded room.
- It is possible to go through this life with many colleagues, acquaintances and associates – and at times we might even call them friends – but such would be a wholly deficient meaning of the word friendship.

When Jesus called his disciples friends he was implying a relationship with them at the deepest level. These were not just associates or acquaintances – known only superficially. Indeed if they had all been on Facebook they might not have shared their profiles with one another; superficially they may not have had very much in common, but those who had struck up a friendship with Jesus knew what it was to have a deep commitment to another person and knew what it was to have that deep commitment returned.

They knew two other things:

- That having the friendship of Jesus in common brought them together in a unique bond and
- That having Jesus as a friend meant they would never be lonely again.

Let me be personal for just one moment: many of you will know that, some two and half years ago our son was badly injured whilst serving with the Royal Marines in Afghanistan. He's doing well now – but still has a bit to go. Can I tell you that in the space of just 24 hours we thought that the lights had gone out on our friendship with Jesus. Let me tell you what I mean by that – as hour after agonising hour passed without any idea of whether our son had survived and we waited and waited for word, my wife, in the weary small hours of the morning asked me to say a prayer for him. And I said I couldn't pray, but we'd best hope that others were praying for us - because the heavens were silent.

But this is what we found: in the days that lay ahead the friends of Jesus were praying and they were there beside us, not with pat or easy answers, just with their presence and their anguish and their love. We discovered in a new and tangible way that the love and friendship of God broke through our loneliness and despair, and, for what it's worth, we discovered the real purpose of the church – to be a community of the friends of Jesus (traditionalist and revisionist friends) who turned out to be his presence and the incarnation of his love when it was needed most.

You know when awful things happen to those around about us and we shrink from making that call or from being in touch because we feel, "we wouldn't know what to say". That's when you must make the call, because it is in our weakness and inadequacy that the spirit of Christ shines through and, as we found, people discover not just who their friends are, but they rediscover through them the friendship of Jesus.

Here is an interesting fact of modern life – that as the influence of religion on people's private lives diminishes there has been growing evidence that people are less able to cope to loneliness, loss and grief. (I heard of this learned research on Woman's Hour on Radio 4 – so it must be true!) And all the while that that has been happening, institutional religion (in a continuing bid to be relevant and influential for good) has been becoming more and more political and campaigning – political with a small 'p' and campaigning with a small 'c'. Now I wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing if I didn't think that the Church should be both "small P"

political and “small C” campaigning, but not at the expense of the most essential part of our mission and calling which is to introduce people to Jesus as a constant companion and friend. So inspired and so accompanied, our campaigning gains meaning and true purpose.

These first disciples were as flawed and fallible as one of us, but as they rose from this meal they rose as friends of Jesus and that would mark them for life. In Gethsemane he asked them to “watch and pray” – who else would you ask to do that but friends. They fell asleep; they had let him down in the simplest of tasks, but they were still friends and more importantly he was still their friend. After that, as the events of the night unfolded, Peter, one of the closest friends, tried to make his friendship count as he followed closely after the arrest and on into the trial. Then as the cock crowed when he could have made it count he let his friend down spectacularly. But did Peter’s weakness make Jesus love him any less?

Count yourselves among the friends of Jesus

And above all else remember two things:

In your loneliest moments of deepest anxiety and forsakenness, let the eternal Son of Man into that loneliness and fill it with his comfort and presence.

AND in this world where friendlessness and loneliness are so common place remember that you are agents of His friendship sharing the despair of the downcast, sitting with those whose who feel all alone. And in this work they will not only meet with you but they will encounter the love of Christ.