

6th Sunday of Easter (Year B): Christian Friendship.

1st Reading: Acts 10 (various verses): The Holy Spirit comes to pagans;

2nd Reading: 1John 4:7-10: God's initiative in showing love;

Gospel: John 15:9-17: Jesus' commandment of love; what it means.

Whenever I read this Sunday's gospel, the middle bit of it strikes a chord with me: *"I shall not call you servants any more; I shall call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father."* Those words were used in the old rite of the ordination of priests, so they made a huge impact on us as students, when one of us was ordained in the college chapel. The words were sung in Latin to a beautiful Anglican psalm-tone that had descants for the men-and-boys choir that was part of Ushaw College life at that time. When I hear recordings of it, the decades fall away! I am sure this will be the same for long-married couples, whenever they hear what they might call "their tune" – a song or piece of music that they loved when they were courting.

I think that the word "friends" sums up this Sunday's three readings. The crude (but true) saying runs: 'We are stuck with our relations, but we choose our friends.' Well, this Sunday, we see God choosing us to be his friends. In the first reading, St Peter (initially, reluctantly) baptized pagans directly into the Church (without their having to become Jews first). The fact that these new Gentile Christians wanted Peter to stay with them afterwards shows that they had become 'friends' already. In the 2nd reading, St John's letter shows, in a famous passage, why "God is love". These days, modern media (especially that aimed at the young) often equates 'love' with sexual attraction, or shallow feelings. For Christians (and for most mature adults, to be fair) love involves wanting the other's happiness, even if it causes some cost to oneself. Yes, physical attraction & pleasure play an important part (especially at first), but true love goes far beyond that. Many armed forces personnel who have fought in war have known this sort of self-sacrificial love for friends and comrades; without it, they could not have survived.

In the gospel, one reason Jesus wanted to call us "friends" was because he intended to share important information with us. (In our own lives today, sharing private information is a mark of genuine friendship and trust.) Jesus' 'information' related to his (and our) relationship with God the Father, and the work of the Holy Spirit in our religious lives. In early Christianity, this information was a closely-guarded secret, because there was fierce persecution, and the authorities mis-represented religious teaching in their propaganda, to get

people to hate Christians. This is what oppressive regimes have done down the years, and it still occurs today. However, as time went by, some leading Christians (for example, the Roman writer St Justin) felt it better to explain our faith openly, and offer a public defence of it. Mind, there is one big difference between sharing the Faith and sharing information in other contexts: we accept that politicians, leading members of organizations, etc, have to keep some secrets, otherwise their jobs would be impossible. Many of you reading this will be in that position at work. Also, in family life, there are secrets that must be kept – and not just about ‘adult’ matters in front of young children. In both public and private life, we need to be careful before we reveal secret information to others. By contrast, our Faith is open for all to read and hear: that is the whole point of the live-streaming of services and these on-line homilies.

Here are two practical questions that can affect friendship. First: do love and friendship mean that we cannot disagree or fall out? No; because as adults, we know that our understanding and experiences can vary. In the early Church, that argument I mentioned in paragraph 2 above (whether pagans could be baptized as Christians without becoming Jews first) was a serious one. If the answer was ‘yes’, it meant that Christianity was becoming a separate religion. If ‘no’, it meant that it was simply a sub-sect of Judaism. The eventual answer was ‘yes’, but it was the first of many disputes in the Church – the key thing was not to let them become so acrimonious as to threaten unity. Pope Francis, who has strong opinions of his own, is trying to keep all Church members united as friends; whether he is succeeding in this, I leave you to judge.

A second question is: can friendship survive separation? Yes; the bonds we build up are not always broken so easily. There are priests in other dioceses, fellow-students from before our ordinations in 1971, who keep in touch by “What’s App” and occasional phone-calls. (Apart from me, everyone else is retired!) If we meet up (usually at funerals), some of us can resume chatting, despite the 53 years since ordination. This is because the friendship is still there.

In our Church, this coming Thursday is Ascension Day, when the risen Jesus made it clear to his friends that they could no longer experience his bodily presence. Instead, the Holy Spirit would allow them to meet him in faith, prayer and the sacraments. I appreciate this is not the same as friends meeting physically, but that is how religious faith works, and I hope that it offers all of you reading this both peace of mind and spiritual comfort. *Fr Jim Dunne.*