

Friendship

Greater love has no-one than this...

Knowle Parish Church

Sunday 4 November 2018

Apprentices of Jesus

Friendship: an introduction

Thank you for welcoming me here at Knowle Parish Church – it is always good for preachers to get out of their normal setting and speak somewhere else.

I want to start by saying how hard it has been for me to write this sermon. Yesterday morning, one of my own close friends told me that he will be in hospital from tomorrow undergoing treatment for aggressive cancer in his kidneys – which has spread to his lungs and bones. He is married with two pre-school children.

I tell you that because it's only fair that you know how I feel right now. And I also tell you that because most of you will know what it feels like to receive news like that. It hurts – because it's love.

And that's where much of our culture has gone wrong.

People long for intimacy and, despite the advances in networked technology, feel more disconnected from other people than ever.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) published an article on loneliness in April this year. The people most likely to feel lonely were the recently widowed and the recently retired.

But the *age group* most likely to feel lonely? 16-24 year olds, 10% of whom say they feel lonely ‘often’ or ‘always’. And the age group second most likely to feel lonely? 25-34 year olds. Almost one in three young adults feels lonely ‘sometimes’, ‘often’ or ‘always’.

Soren Kierkegaard said, **loneliness is the want of intimacy**.¹ And the **want of intimacy** is becoming an epidemic – despite the rise of social media, people and their communities are becoming *more* disconnected, not less, as more and more people sit locked away at home, bathed in the warm glow of their wifi.

What we want is superficial: we want love without the cost. But love without cost isn’t love at all. The intimacy we all crave comes at a cost – the cost of love. True love, despite what Hollywood might have us believe, is less about sex and more about sacrifice. That is what Jesus showed and taught us – and if we are to be his apprentices, we had better listen.

Two friends – John and Jack – were exploring in the desert. After roaming all day long under the hot sun, they set up their tent and fell asleep. Some hours later, John woke up his friend.

‘Jack, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.’

Jack looked up and replied, ‘I can see millions of stars.’

‘What does that tell you?’ asked John.

Jack thought for a minute and said, ‘Astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Time wise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it’s evident God is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?’

After a moment of silence, John spoke, ‘It tells me two things. First, that you are an idiot.’

Jack looked at John, surprised. ‘Why do you say that?’ he asked.

‘Because, second,’ replied John, ‘It has not occurred to you that someone has stolen our tent.’

I have to say, I have very few friends with whom I would share a tent. I like my personal space, and I flip between enjoying people's company, and wanting to be on my own – which makes me quite difficult to be around at times. Good friends are hard to find.

This is the point at which I apologise to Matt, because I'm not sure I'm going to go where the sermon is intended to go. As I write this, I've been sitting at my desk for four hours, trying to write about different circles of friends and levels of friendship.

But I can't do it. Whether that is to do with my own limitations as a preacher – I find thematic sermons really difficult to write – or something else, I don't know.

So instead I'm going to talk about three things, and between them we will end up with a definition of the love of 'friendship':

1. Jesus was the friend of sinners
2. Jesus died for his friends
3. Jesus taught us to love our neighbour

The friend of sinners

Jesus was known – in fact infamously so – as a ‘friend of sinners’ (Matthew 11.19, Luke 7.34). He ate with tax-collectors. Now, the tax man isn’t popular *today*, but in *Jesus’* day they collaborated with the occupying army, betraying their own people for financial gain. He allowed a prostitute to wash his feet with her hair, an incredibly intimate display that he allowed to happen in public. He touched and healed people with disabilities – at the time, they were assumed to be steeped in sin. The woman who touched the hem of his robe in the crowd had been bleeding for over a decade – she would have been shunned by her village as a sinner being punished, and was unable to participate in worship due to her condition.

But Jesus treated all these people with dignity and compassion. He valued them; he treated them kindly; he loved them. It’s no wonder everywhere he went he could barely move because of the crowds.

It’s easy to value people we like, the people like us, at least on a superficial level. They have the same interests, drive the same car, go on the same holidays, live on the same street, their kids go to the same school – which probably isn’t the school that kids from *that* estate go to.

In my parish of Amington there is a clear divide between what used to be the village – where the church and the old houses are – and the council estate. The residents of the old village even convinced the council to put bollards across one of the roads – which now goes nowhere – to stop people from the ‘wrong part’ of Amington driving through.

It seems to me that attitude is literally the opposite of what Jesus taught. The bollards across Juniper Road declare loudly, ‘You aren’t good enough to come here; you don’t belong.’

Jesus was criticised then for the company he kept, and if I’m perfectly honest I imagine many would criticise him for doing the same thing now.

Friends, it’s easy to dismiss this as ‘something Jesus did’, a thing for him, and not a thing for us. We can even find Scriptures to back us up; 1 Corinthians 15.33: **‘bad company corrupts good character’**; Psalm 1.1: **‘blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked’**; Proverbs 24.1: **‘do not envy the wicked nor desire their company’**. That is wise advice – we need to watch the effect other people have on us. But too often we define ‘good character’ as ‘people like me’, and ‘bad character’ as ‘people who are not like me’ or even worse ‘people who live *over there*’.

Remember what Jesus was known as: not ‘he occasionally drops a penny in a beggar’s bowl’, not ‘he said hi to a prostitute once’; he was known as the **friend of sinners**. He truly loved them – and because of that, they listened to him, and they changed.

You see, when Jesus loved sinners, there were two things he *didn’t* say. He *didn’t* say, ‘You must behave like this and then I’ll love you.’ And he *didn’t* say, ‘I love you so you can do whatever you like.’ What he *did* say is this: ‘It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, I love you anyway’ – and people’s lives were transformed. He said, ‘Give me your sin, then go and live my life.’ It isn’t fair, but that is the exchange of Jesus’ love: his life, for our sin.

Jesus loves even *sinners* – which is good, or he wouldn’t love us – and we should do the same. **‘As I have loved you,’** Jesus said, **‘so you must love one another’** (John 13.34). And again, **‘love each other as I have loved you’** (John 15.12). In other words, *‘In the way I have loved you, so you must love one another.’*

The greatest lover

And how did Jesus love us? That last verse I read from John carries on: **‘love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’** (John 15.12-13).

Three friends were stranded on a desert island, and found a magic lantern containing a genie, who granted them each one wish. The first friend wished he could leave the island and be back home. Then – ‘flash’ – he was gone.

The second made the same wish. Then – ‘flash’ – he was gone.

The third friend looked around him, paused, and said, ‘I’m so lonely – I wish my friends were here.’

What is the best thing a friend has ever done for you? It’s often when things go wrong in our lives that we discover the people who really love us – when standing by us comes at personal cost.

Jesus said: **‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’** (John 15.13). Do you know what the next four words are? **‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends...’** *count 1-4 on fingers* **‘You are my friends... You are my friends if you do what I command’** (John 15.14). And what does he command? **‘My command is this: love each other as I have loved you’** (John 15.12).

Though friends have, and do still today, we may not need to die in a friend’s place. However, the mark of how true our love is, is not how it makes us feel, but how much we are willing to sacrifice, how much we are willing to give.

One of the problems today is that we make do with such puny superficial feelings, in place of the deep, powerful love of God. We are content with superficial relationships and friendships – why? Because we are afraid. We are afraid that if we give too much away, if we open ourselves up too much, we will get hurt.

Friends, I have news for you: love hurts. Look at what happened to Jesus – and why did he come? To show us the depth of God's love, reaching down into the worst and darkest places and taking all that sludge onto himself. Love hurts. It hurts when someone upsets our loved ones. It hurts when they make mistakes. It hurts when they hurt us. It hurts when we lose them. **If you never want to be hurt, it's simple: I suggest you never love.**

But true love is the only way to conquer loneliness and isolation. True love is the only way we can truly open ourselves up to another person. True love risks all, but the only reward worth having comes from true love: true love is the only way we can know and feel what it's like to be accepted for who we are, not hiding behind a mask. True love is the most gentle and powerful transforming force there is: we open ourselves up to another person *and they don't turn away* – and that changes everything.

True love has nothing to do with Hollywood and everything to do with Calvary: true love is what Jesus did when he died for you and when he died for me, and *that* is how *we* are to love one another.

Jesus did not turn away from us but sacrificed everything for love – and *that*, my friends, is how *we* are to love one another.

The best neighbour

I heard about a Sunday School teacher who was telling the parable of the Good Samaritan to her group of 4-5 year olds. She was making it as vivid as possible to keep the children interested.

Then at the end she challenged the children: ‘If you saw a person lying on the roadside all wounded and bleeding, what would you do?’ There was hushed silence.

Then a thoughtful little girl broke the silence and said, ‘I think I’d throw up.’

When Jesus was asked about what it means to love your neighbour, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I’m sure you know it. A Jewish man was attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho: a notorious road, known as the Way of Blood. He lay, broken, bruised and bleeding, by the side of the road.

A passing priest crossed the road to avoid him. A Levite – a temple servant – also passed by on the other side.

Eventually a Samaritan – whose people were enemies of the Jews – came past. He treated the man's wounds, and carried him to an inn, paid for his care, and promised to return to check up on him. 'Which was a neighbour to the man in need?' Jesus asked.²

But there's a flip-side to that question: 'Who was the *Samaritan's* neighbour?'

It wasn't a true story – but come with me on this. There were no doubt many people in need that day. There were almost certainly other people who had been beaten and robbed on that road – it wasn't called the Way of Blood for nothing.

But the Good Samaritan came across *that* man in *that* place. His neighbour was *that* man in *that* place – not the others whose need was just as great. His neighbour was not *all* men, it was *that* man.

And that's a critical point. If you're anything like me, sometimes you look at the world and it is overwhelming. There is *so much* need, there is *so much* pain, there are *so many* people who need love and care – and that's just in my family.

But Jesus doesn't tell us to love *everyone*; he tells us to love *anyone*: anyone we find in need, anyone we find who is hurting, anyone – even people we despise, even our enemies.

Our 'neighbours' are exactly that: the people God gives to us in our lives, the people near us, the people around us, the people we know. We don't need to worry about everyone else – they have their own neighbours. We need to focus on loving *our* neighbours.

We can't possibly be everyone's friend. To be honest, there are some people we simply won't get on with, no matter how hard we try. But that's ok – the church is a big family – if we all play our part, everyone can be cared for.

So the question is: do you walk round with your eyes open? Is your heart ready to love the stranger God brings across your way? Are you able to look beyond the superficialities, to look beyond the surface, to look beyond the things that divide us, and see the person Jesus loves, the person for whom Jesus died – and then befriend *that* person? Are you able to ignore the circumstances – Jesus did – and learn to see the *person*?

Friendship: a definition

So now we come to our definition of the love of friendship, based on what Jesus did and taught.

The love of friendship, the love Jesus had for his friends:

- Comes first from God
- Loves even sinners – and longs to see them change
- Is willing to be hurt, to make sacrifices
- Sees beyond the surface to the person in need of love

Is that how you love your friends?

Do you have strict standards of moral behaviour for your friends, or are you willing to love anyone, warts and all? (Health warning alert: we do need to be careful our friends don't lead us astray – while remembering our Master was called the 'friend of sinners'.)

Are you willing to look beyond 'people like me' and love your neighbour, whoever they may be?

Is there anyone in your life right now that you are trying to pass by on the other side, that maybe you need to stop and care for?

Or, perhaps you need to forget all of that, and hear this:

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

Ephesians 2.3b-5a (NIV)

The source of all love, the source of our love, the source of our friendships, is the great and abundant love of God for us in Jesus Christ our Lord – love stronger even than death.

It is by that love that Jesus calls us not servants, but friends.

‘My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.’

John 15.12-15 (NIV)

Amen.

¹ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/26-october/comment/opinion/tackling-the-loneliness-epidemic>. Accessed 03/11/2018.

² See Luke 10.25-37.