

Year A. 17th May 2020. The Rev'd Lyndon Phillips

In our gospel reading today Jesus continues to deliver what is known as his Farewell Discourse (chps. 14-17), preparing his disciples for his departure and their receiving of the Holy Spirit. We experience within this reading Jesus' focus on love. Imagine the scene Jesus and his disciples gathering together following The Last Supper. Friends deep in conversation, genuine friendship; where one's own vulnerability engages with the other vulnerability.

Do you recall a friendship that was so strong that when for whatever reason you were no longer able to meet or chat regularly? Do you remember feeling abandoned? We all have had relationships like that; maybe it was due to either relocation or the death of a loved one or friend, whatever the reason often we have a sense of anger, in this situation of feeling abandoned. Our life suddenly has a void and what follows is a sense of loneliness. And we wonder how we are going to survive without that close friend nearby. It simply doesn't seem possible that someone else could take their place.

This is what the disciples were experiencing just as Jesus was about to leave them. They were bewildered, feeling deserted and alone. Peter, Thomas, Philip, and the others all wondered where Jesus was going. From the reading I believe we can all feel their great sense of loss and abandonment.

Friendships built on unconditional love are unique. The type of closeness that you feel with others who care about you and share your passions are rare. Jesus and his disciples had formed a special bond, a friendship that transcends all others. They had shared diverse experiences together, witnessing healings, seeing lives turned around and learning lessons that would lead them through life. With Jesus they felt confident. Their fellowship carried them through stormy seas, rugged terrain, confrontations with the Pharisees and encounters with sceptics who disbelieved in their mission. But, through it all they stayed together, loved one another, as Jesus commanded.

When we have friends who love us we feel confident to grow, mature, and through our friendships we are encouraged on. But when they leave us, 'aloneness' sets in. Without the essential support and love of friends our confidence can diminish.

Jesus told his disciples that he would never leave them alone. 'I will not leave you desolate,' he said. He then went on to say there would be a 'counsellor,' an advocate, someone who would walk with them and look out for them in the future.

God walks with us in several ways; with people, with nature and even animals.

While I was attending a seminar last year, I was seated next to a lady by the name of 'Janine'. She was a teacher living in Mildura, and through our conversations I came to know a little of her story. Harry and I had lived in a locality called Iraak shortly after we were married. It is a very isolated part of Sunraysia. 60 Kilometres south of Mildura, 30 kilometres east of Carwarp and about 30 kilometres from Red Cliffs and Nangiloc. Being a new mum without the support I was accustomed to only increased the sense of isolation that I felt. During this time I meet another young mum, Heather. She became my lifeline, a confidant. We kept in contact for a while after we moved to Gippsland, and then I guess we both moved on but I have never forgotten how important she was to meduring that very vulnerable time. Janine as it happened taught with Heather and through this recent contact we have been able to reconnect.

As I reflect on my past I am keenly aware that God has always managed to provide me with at least one close personal friend. That friend I believe is there for a particular purpose, just as God promised.

Friendship, however does not materialize without some accountability. Jesus promises us we will never be alone, but he brackets that promise with the phrase, 'keep my commandments.' He is referring to the love of God and love of neighbour. Our loyalty to God is set side by side with love for others. In other words God expects us to reach out.

When people are lonely they tend to compound that loneliness by withdrawing from community. They isolate themselves from contact with people. By failing to reach out they create barriers which prevent them from making friends. We tend to forget that friendships are born because one person took a risk and reached out to another. Vulnerability encountering vulnerability.

God's unconditional love I believe is the bonding agent that makes friendship a reality. When we are willing to extend ourselves to others on the winding pathways of life we can be assured that God will never leave us alone.

Here in the gospel of John we find the disciples feeling abandoned as Jesus will be leaving them soon. Life will be different without their faithful companion and friend. How will they continue his Ministry? How will they survive in a hostile world? Jesus prepared them by saying 'I will not leave you orphaned'. He assured them that there would be a comforter, a counsellor, an advocate who would be their friend and helper. Jesus would continue to 'abide in them' as the Holy Spirit and therefore they would continue to experience the presence and assurance of God.

That same spirit is within us as well. And, that relationship depends on our willingness, as Jesus said, 'to keep his commandments.' In other words, we will never be alone as long as we continue to 'love one another and love God.'

The abiding presence of God is experienced in several ways, first by friendship. In seeking friendship and being a friend. And then we can experience friendship when someone acts as an advocate or helper on our behalf. When someone befriends us in such a way it enables us to experience life again. We no longer feel the emptiness or void of being alone. Experiencing the love of interaction with another human being reveals God as being with us as friend, counsellor and helper.

If we read a little further into this portion of scripture, verse 26 we have Jesus revealing even more; 'But the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.' Jesus had taught his disciples many lessons. He filled their minds and hearts with stories and parables, and sometimes they just observed him interacting with people. By telling them that the Holy Spirit would 'teach them everything' implies that those teachable moments would stay with them and enable them to reach out just as Jesus had.

Reaching out is not only for those who are extroverts it is also for those of us who consider themselves introverts. Jesus said 'I will give you the Spirit of truth and you know him for he dwells within you.'

The Spirit of God is within all of us. It is not something we have to earn, or acquire; it is waiting to be released.

We are never alone. God's Spirit is always with us. There will always be friends to walk with us wherever life takes us. Yet God wants us to reach out and be willing to include strangers in our lives. Sometimes God's Spirit moves us because of our faith and passion for God. Sometimes we have to be totally alone to know it. Nevertheless the Spirit of God is always there, waiting for us.

The Lord be with you.